

BEST FINISH EVER: *Arizona One-ups Aaron Rodgers's Miracle* P. 6

January 25, 2016

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P. 24

Manning *vs.* Brady
XVII

January 24, 2016 | Denver, Colorado



THE GLOBALLEERS

Kristaps Porzingis P. 48

Ben Simmons P. 56



Jess Hyland, City Explorer

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Rooftop art exhibit in Portland. My schedule
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As a naval aviator, test pilot and astronaut, Mark Kelly has been recognized for his courage and determination. A true pioneer, he appreciates the innovation, craftsmanship and utility of the Exospace B55, the first Breitling connected chronograph. This multifunction electronic instrument, powered by an exclusive COSC chronometer-certified caliber, reinvents the connected watch by dedicating it to the service of aviation professionals. Performance, functionality, and reliability. Welcome to the world of tomorrow's technology. Welcome to our world.

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NFL PLAYOFFS

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The Patriots

Their consistent success is due to an offense that changes

By Greg A. Bedard

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Presented by Gatorade and Microsoft Surface

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By Alex Prewitt

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BEN SIMMONS

The bicontinental LSU star has a game hard to define but easy to love

By Luke Winn

Photograph by
Rich Graessle
Icon Sportswire

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:

Doug Pensinger/Getty Images (Peyton Manning) and John Mersits/CSM (Tom Brady); John W. McDonough for Sports Illustrated (Larry Fitzgerald)

Sports Illustrated

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FOR JAN. 25, 2016



Up in the Air

This weekend's NFC championship game between the Panthers and the Cardinals will be a rematch of last season's wild-card meeting in Charlotte, won by the Panthers 27-16, but it will be the first time two Heisman Trophy-winning quarterbacks have faced off in the NFL playoffs. Will **Cam Newton** (Heisman 2010) or **Carson Palmer** (Heisman 2002) make his first Super Bowl? How will the league's two best offenses match up? Go to SI.com/nfl for a preview of the game and complete conference championship coverage.

SI.COM'S TOP STORIES

1 Disappearing Act

For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com—including a feature on why Ohio State defensive end **Joey Bosa** spent last fall in solitude—go to SI.com/topstories



2 Path to Redemption

After a wrongful conviction, Darrell Williams tries to fulfill his NBA dream

3 Super Bowl Injuries

What it's like for a player to get hurt in the game of their life

4 The NFL in L.A.

The rise, fall and return of the NFL in Los Angeles

5 Chip Kelly, Take Two

What did the former Eagles coach learn from his first NFL job?

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Digital Bonus



The Face of Uncertainty

From the SI Vault | Oct. 7, 1996

The St. Louis Rams aren't yet sure what prized rookie running back **Lawrence Phillips** will amount to, but four games into his NFL career he is a liability on the field and a potential embarrassment off it

By S.L. Price

To read the full story online, go to SI.com/phillips

The Future of Hydration

The team at the Gatorade Sports Science Institute is working to democratize the individual hydration needs of all athletes through a level of personalization currently only available to professional teams. Go to SI.com/sportsfuel to learn more about democratizing the science of sweat.



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of
4Leading
Off

INSTANT CLASSIC

This Finish Will Not Be Topped

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN W. MCDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

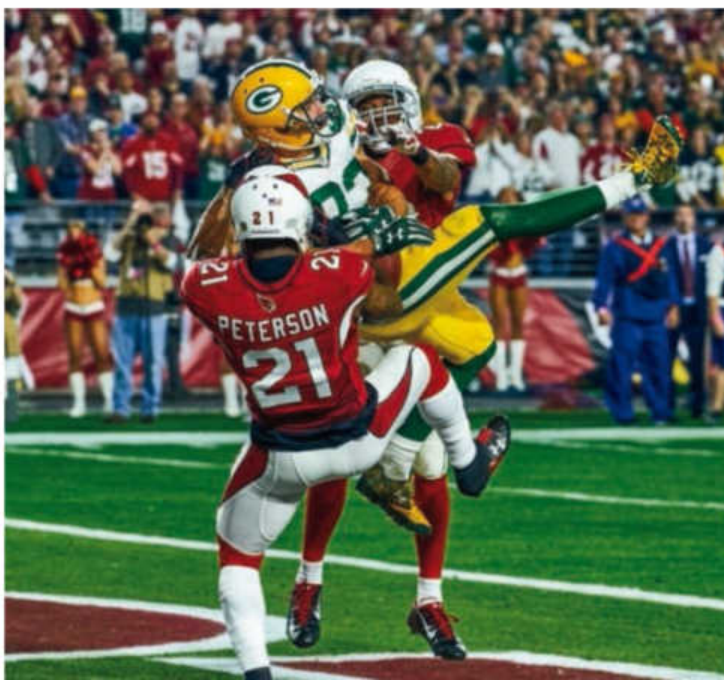
■ CARDINALS 26, PACKERS 20

We should all be lucky enough to age like Larry Fitzgerald. When the 32-year-old wide receiver known as Fitz is cutting across the field, you notice the fluidity of his movements, the danger he poses after the catch. When he's crossing the locker room clad in only a towel, you notice that he is ripped like Adonis Johnson in *Creed*. For further testimony to Fitzgerald's upper-body strength, consult Morgan Burnett, the Packers' safety whose hopes were high as he closed on Fitz midway through his wild, weaving 75-yard catch-and-run on the first play of overtime last Saturday night in Glendale, Ariz. Before Burnett could make the tackle, he found himself shoved to the turf, victim of a highly persuasive Fitzgerald stiff-arm.

The NFC divisional playoff game, like that play, featured a series of unexpected twists and turns—or, in the curious case of the botched coin flip, a *failure* to turn—that got more remarkable, and less plausible, as the evening wore on.

"My damn jaw was on the ground," said Arizona linebacker Kevin Minter, recalling Aaron Rodgers's final play of his season. The Packers' QB had forced the extra period with one of the most remarkable throws of his Hall of Fame career, an off-balance, falling-to-his-left, 60-yards-in-the-air parabola that found the pride of Saginaw Valley State (Mich.), one Jeff Janis, a second-year special teams ninja who entered last Saturday with four career receptions and zero TDs but finished the game with seven grabs and a pair of scores.

That Hail Mary, reminiscent of



OH, HIGH

Peterson, an All-Pro cornerback, up against a guy, Janis, with four career catches coming in—we know how this pass from Rodgers ends, right? Guess again.



HAIL, SEIZER

Janis's miracle grab—his second in a span of four plays—pushed the Pack into OT and reinforced the thrower's status as one hail of a clutch quarterback.





2
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4

Leading Off

Rodgers's season-saving heave against the Lions in Week 13, was made possible by a longer and less conceivable Hail Mary *earlier in the same series*. (No, a Hail Mary needn't result in a TD. And, yes, Rodgers had enough of them this season to complete a Novena.)

Before it was hard to believe, this showdown was—let's be honest—hard to *watch*. Already missing three of its top receivers, Green Bay lost a fourth when Randall Cobb left the game with a bruised lung in the first quarter. Making do with Janis, Jared Abbrederis (he of nine previous NFL catches) and James Jones (cut twice since the end of last season), Rodgers was not his usual swashbuckling self. Until he was.

Rodgers and Arizona QB Carson Palmer traded interceptions to start the second half, Palmer getting picked off yet again, on the second play of the fourth quarter, after which the slovenliness gave way to, well, craziness. It began with ...

... *The Carom*. Trailing 13-10, Palmer drove Arizona to Green Bay's nine-yard line. There he let fly what could easily have been pick number three: a pass intended for Fitzgerald, who was blanketed by rookie corner Damarious Randall. The dart ricocheted off Randall's left forearm, caroming 10 yards toward the back of the end zone, where wideout Michael Floyd gratefully snared it in stride for a 17-13 lead. "I'm so happy Mike was in the right place at the right time," said Fitzgerald. "That's a heads-up play."

It would soon be followed by a correspondingly boneheaded play that gave Green Bay life—a miracle that set up further miracle. Let's call it...

... *Hail Mary I*. In an otherwise giddy Arizona locker room, one player sat at his stall, his back to the room. Was he upset? Disappointed? "No, man," said cornerback Justin Bethel, holding up his phone, "I'm just trying to return all these texts." Perhaps Bethel's friends sought to console him for what had happened with 55 seconds left in regulation and



SPLITTING IMAGE

Once he made his catch in the flat on the first play of OT, it took Fitzgerald all of 11 seconds, to weave through the defense and traverse the field, from Arizona's 20-yard line to Green Bay's five.



3
of
4

Leading Off

Arizona up 20-13. After being sacked at his own four-yard line by Dwight Freeney (*page 32*), facing fourth-and-20—all has got to be lost here, right?—Rodgers rolled to his left and uncorked a bomb to Janis, who'd slipped behind Bethel. That 60-yard mini-miracle was the longest fourth-down completion in the last 15 NFL postseasons.

Asked what he'd known beforehand about Janis, Bethel replied, "Number 83? I know he hadn't really gotten a lot of plays [this season]." Still, he allowed, "I knew they were gonna throw at him a lot, 'cause I was covering him." Such is life for *any* corner playing opposite three-time All-Pro Patrick Peterson. While Rodgers picked on Bethel without mercy—as will Panthers QB Cam Newton this Sunday—the fact is, he's holding up O.K. for a special teams stud who was pressed into service in Week 15, when Tyrann Mathieu tore his right ACL. And for the record, it was Peterson, not Bethel, whom Janis victimized on...

... *Hail Mary II*. Noting that Rodgers had scrambled to his right before throwing that game-winner against Detroit, Cardinals defensive coordinator James Bettcher dialed up a blitz to that side.

Rodgers was a step ahead of him. Figuring that's what Arizona would do, Rodgers made adjustments at the line: He kept tight end Richard Rodgers in to block and shifted running back James Starks to the right. Neither precaution prevented linebacker Markus Golden from knifing through the middle, forcing Rodgers to roll to his left and turn his back to the end zone before uncorking that off-balance prayer.

"The thing is, we executed it the way we wanted to," said slot corner Jeraud Powers. "Patrick was going to knock the ball down, but in the process he kind of knocked the ball into the guy."

Elevating behind Janis, Peterson indeed served as a kind of backstop, slowing the descending ball and helping "the guy" (as Arizona defenders repeatedly referred to Janis) snag it.



4
of
4

Leading Off

Tied at 20, the Cardinals had not lost, though one could be forgiven for assuming they had, based on the funereal silence that fell over University of Phoenix Stadium. Nearly as disquieting, for Arizona and Green Bay fans alike, was the peculiar turn of events later described as ...

... *The Anomaly*. On the coin toss preceding OT, Rodgers called tails. It was heads. But as the Packers' captain rushed to point out, gesticulating and aggrieved like a septuagenarian arguing at bocce, the coin had failed to flip! Indeed, it had remained flat, hovercraftlike, during its rise and fall. A tweet from the authoritative @FootballZebras explained that the NFL officials' manual "allows for voided toss in case of an anomaly."

Finding this anomalous, referee Clete Blakeman called for a do-over. Arizona won again, setting the stage for ...

... *The Ramble*. The 75-yard pickup on the first snap of OT began with an uncharacteristically balletic escape from three defenders by Palmer, who then chucked the ball to Fitz, camped out undetected in the left flat. Having delivered his team to the doorstep of victory, it was fitting that the wideout should then deliver ...

... *The Knockout*. Two plays later, with Fitzgerald lined up left in the slot, Palmer took a shotgun snap. Crashing down from his right came outside linebacker Mike Neal, deliberately unblocked. "If the end sees me," said Fitzgerald, who snuck underneath the left side of his line, "[Palmer] will throw a pass. If he attacks [Palmer], then I come underneath."

With Neal bearing down on Palmer, the QB nonchalantly shoveled the ball to Fitzgerald, whose five-yard touchdown ended Green Bay's season, and one of the NFL's more thrilling playoff games, 26-20. "I've never been part of this kind of finish ever. *Ever*," repeated Freeney, the Arizona sackmeister, who then excused himself to check on his mother.

"I can only imagine what *she* was feeling."



FLIP THE SCRIPT

The Cardinals relished Fitzgerald's twisty five-yard capper, a TD pitch that lifted them from gloom and doom to the NFC championship game.



INBOX

FOR JAN. 11, 2016

At the age of 71, **Jim Boeheim** (*"It's My Team Again"*) is given a rare opportunity—a month off during the

holiday season to be with his wife and three children. He gets to watch his son Jimmy average 35 points over two games in his last season of high school basketball, and Boeheim can't think of any highlights other than a movie he watched? Bah humbug, Coach.

Michael Hairfield, Roanoke, Va.

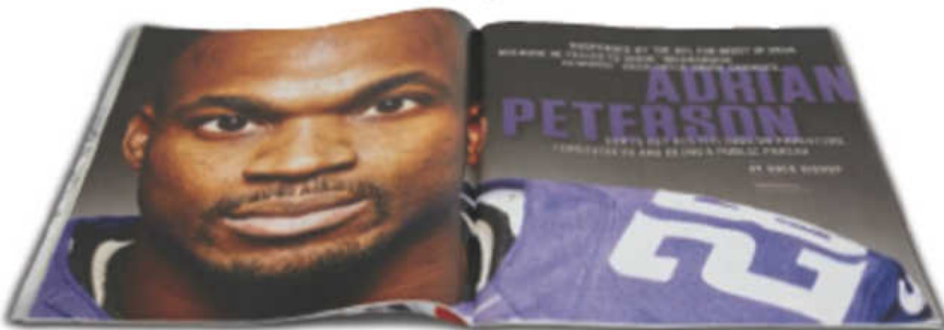


Adrian Peterson may believe in his heart that there aren't many fathers better than him, but part of being a good father is being around for your kids—day to day, not just visiting on weekends and sending a check. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't see how you can do that by having seven kids with multiple women.

Ken Davenport, San Diego

I forced myself to read the entire Peterson article, hoping maybe there might be a nugget of insight that could explain why he thinks beating a child with a stick until his buttocks and scrotum bleed is not child abuse or something he should be ashamed of and punished for. Sadly, there wasn't.

Russell Wanek, Centreville, Va.



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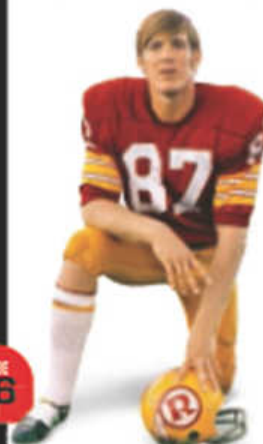
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SCORECARD

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After his record-setting Rose Bowl performance (368 all-purpose yards), Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey proved that Derrick Henry's glitzy stats, garnered behind Alabama's pro-caliber O-line, were not nearly as Heisman-worthy as McCaffrey's do-it-all season.

L.T. Andrews
Willoughby Hills, Ohio



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56

Thanks to Tom Callahan for his poignant article about Jerry Smith (*"He Was One of Us"*). It's truly a shame that he has not been enshrined in Canton. As if holding the TD record for tight ends for 27 years wasn't reason enough, the laudatory statements made by his teammates, who accepted him for the man he was, make it an even greater injustice.

Paul Jacobs
Jupiter, Fla.



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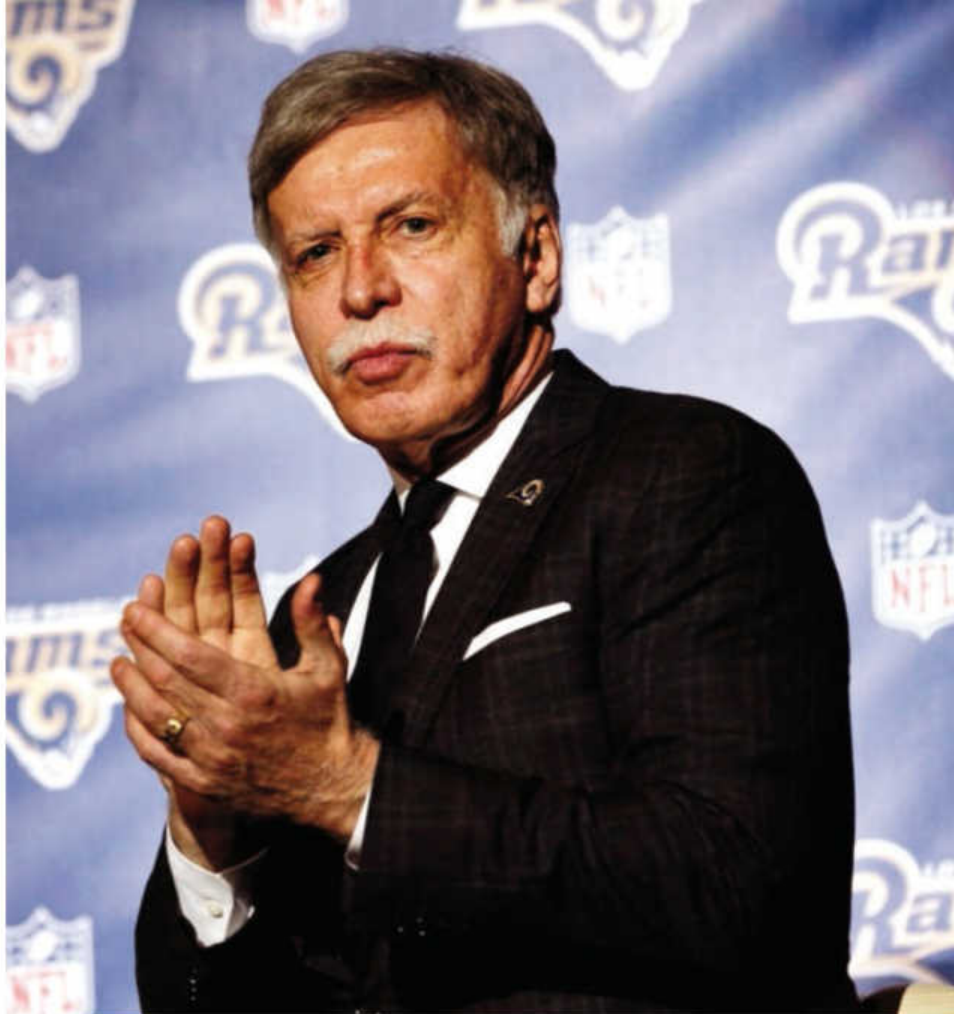
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SCORECARD

West Pointed

A week after his Rams were awarded the right to move to L.A., owner Stan Kroenke talked to SI

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

WHEN NFL OWNERS voted 30–2 last week to relocate the Rams to Los Angeles, they tilted the league’s center of gravity. They also trained the limelight of Hollywood on the owner of the team they selected. A native of Missouri, Enos Stanley (Stan) Kroenke might be worth billions and—as owner of the NHL’s Avalanche, the NBA’s Nuggets, MLS’s Rapids and the EPL’s Arsenal—may have more money invested in sports than anyone on the planet. But from now on he’ll be known as the man who, after years of failed negotiations in St. Louis, decided to go big rather than stay home; the man who went West to bring football and a \$2.7 billion pleasure dome to the City of Angels.

Do you feel as if you won?

SK: We never viewed this as a competition. This process is designed to be hard, in the best interests of all franchises, their respective cities and the NFL. All of the previous L.A. stadium proposals were real estate development projects without a team. Most of the projects had different issues and never really got off the ground. With us having a team and with our real estate experience, it wasn’t a difficult concept. We believed we could help solve a problem for our 31 partners and bring the NFL back to Los Angeles. This was never personal.

Do you see similarities between this and the real estate development strategies you’ve used building shopping centers, warehouses and apartments?

SK: This is a big real estate development project with the stadium as the anchor. The stadium is 20 to 25% of the project. We are building a true entertainment venue and a city within a city. Our 300-acre site, for example, is larger than the footprint of Century City in Los Angeles. This is a developer’s dream. Commissioner Goodell asked for very specific things in his letter in 2012 to the ownership concerning any team wishing to relocate to Los Angeles. He wanted an “iconic” stadium and an entertainment district. So

an iconic stadium with an entertainment district is exactly what we created.

I have said that I'm not sure a rational person would have done what we've done without the perspective of decades of experience in real estate development and the sports business.

What is the biggest issue facing the NFL?

SK: I'd say stability with television contracts and stability with labor and our players. Those two things must continue to work well for the long-term stability of the league. They allow

among the most watched franchises will make you more of a public figure?

SK: Sports figures are public figures. I've owned teams for more than 20 years. London is a comparable stage to Los Angeles, and Arsenal has one of the most passionate and vocal fan bases in sports.

You're a Missouri guy, named for St. Louis legends Enos Slaughter and Stan Musial. After bringing football home, what were the emotions of moving the franchise out?

SK: It's extremely hard. I

alternatives. I understand the emotional side of sports, but when you look at the rational, economic side, what was expected of us made no sense. That still didn't make this an easy decision. It was extremely difficult and very emotional. **With all your obligations, how involved do you anticipate being in the Los Angeles Rams?**

SK: We try to find the most capable people and put them in place to run the teams on the field and off. We always stay close to the businesses. We want to make sure they remain healthy. An unhealthy franchise is a bad thing. It's not any fun for the owner, I can tell you. So we will always be involved.

At your next family gathering, how do you anticipate being received?

SK: My kinfolk and several friends from Missouri have already spoken with me. There's an old saying: "Be sure you're right, then go ahead." They brought that up. They said they've never seen me not act that way. So they know our approach was right and fair. They are fully behind us. I think the people of Missouri also get it. There will always be the emotional side. Sports fans are passionate. But this decision was not about me or St. Louis. It was about what was in the best long-term interest of the NFL and our 31 partners. □

"I'm not sure a rational person would have done what we've done."

all markets to compete for titles, as evidenced by this year's playoff contenders. **How do you feel about having another NFL team as a tenant? (The Chargers have an option to move to the new stadium. If they don't accept within a year, the Raiders get the option.)**

SK: That was part of the relocation approval process, and we're happy to welcome a second team. A second team would be viewed as a partner, not our tenant. With the league's stadium program, two teams make it easier to finance these projects. The stadium has been designed to host two teams from Day One.

As a private person, are you concerned that owning what will surely be

never dreamed I would be put in that position. But we were put in that position. People forget that when we brought the team to St. Louis, the city already had a stadium without an NFL tenant. It was very important to the Rams, when we moved there, to have the lease in proper form that required the stadium to be kept in a certain way for the long-term stability of the franchise. Stadiums shouldn't be a competitive disadvantage. That was the situation we faced.

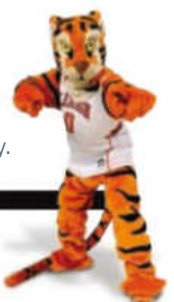
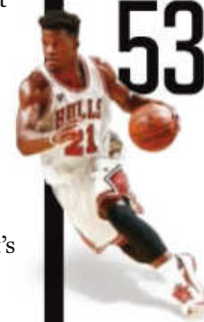
We had given stadium officials passes for a number of years to help them out. We told them years in advance that they should be prepared for us exploring

Goals scored by **Wayne Rooney** for Manchester United, a Premier League record for the most goals with one club. Thierry Henry scored 175 in nine seasons for Arsenal. Rooney's record-breaker was the only goal in a 1-0 victory over Liverpool on Sunday.

Points scored in consecutive games last week by Bulls guard **Jimmy Butler**. The former, which

came Thursday against the 76ers, tied Stephen Curry for the most in an NBA game this season; the latter, which came Friday against the Mavericks, marked the fewest Butler has scored in a game since April 5, 2014.

Consecutive wins against ranked teams by **Clemson**, the first time its men's hoops team has done so. The Tigers beat No. 16 Louisville on Jan. 10, No. 9 Duke on Jan. 13 and No. 8 Miami last Saturday.



BUSINESS

+

Boola Moola

The latest school to join the college sports gold rush? Yale



The New Year brings news from the cash-choked world of college sports. On Jan. 14, Nike tacked another 15 years and \$252 million onto its contract with Ohio State—college sports' fourth new shoe-and-apparel record deal in less than two years. And, three days prior, in an event that lends itself to a most poetic headline (*left*), Under Armour announced a contract with Yale that a source puts at \$16.5 million over 10 years. That's more annually than Illinois and Rutgers of the Big Ten make from their deals with Nike.

The Bulldogs have not been to the NCAA basketball tournament since 1962, do not play football in the FBS and are rarely on TV. So what's the appeal? Yale is globally recognized in a way that Under Armour aspires to be. Its alumni have influence,

and by fielding 35 sports, the school offers an R&D lab for new products. And the company can buff its brand by associating with a university founded in 1701.

Some \$2.5 million of the deal is said to be earmarked for "marketing activation," such as commercials on telecasts. Under Armour will also offer internships for undergraduates, not just athletes—a rare instance of shoe-company largesse extending beyond the athletic department.

It's a deal that could become the norm for Ivy League schools, but it also underscores an old tension. College sports sees its mission as higher education, except when it sees its mission as making money. Time will tell whether Yale is honorably pursuing both.

—Alexander Wolff

A Week of Loss



MONTE IRVIN, 96

Roy Campanella called Irvin "the best all-around player I have ever seen." Willie Mays said he was "like my second father." Like those fellow Negro leagues veterans, Irvin wound up in the Hall of Fame. Once considered the most likely player to break baseball's color barrier, Irvin, a World War II vet, didn't reach the majors until 1949, at age 30, but the outfielder helped the Giants win two pennants and the 1954 World Series, while making one All-Star team. He later spent 17 years working in the commissioner's office.



TED MARCHIBRODA, 84

Marchibroda was more than just a former NFL quarterback with the Steelers and Cardinals and the coach of both the Baltimore Colts and Ravens. In 1990, as the offensive coordinator, he instituted a no-huddle attack that helped the Bills reach the first of four straight Super Bowls. Buffalo lost to a Giants team whose defense was coached by Bill Belichick, whom Marchibroda had given his first NFL job at \$25 a week in 1975. Said Belichick last Saturday, "I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Ted Marchibroda."



LAWRENCE PHILLIPS, 40

Despite immense talent, the running back repeatedly had off-field issues, culminating in his convictions on felony assault and domestic abuse that earned him a 31-year prison sentence in 2008. After Phillips helped Nebraska win national titles in 1994 and '95, the Rams drafted him No. 6 in '96. He played just three NFL seasons, gaining 1,453 yards. In 2015 he was accused of killing a fellow inmate. Phillips was found dead in his cell of a suspected suicide.



ANDREW SMITH, 25

An Academic All-America and three-year starter, the 6'11" Smith played for the Butler teams that lost in the NCAA championship game in 2010 and '11, and was the Bulldogs' leading rebounder as a senior in '12–13. In January '14 he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma while playing professionally in Lithuania. He nearly died but made what his wife, Samantha, called a miraculous recovery, only to have the cancer return last year. Celtics coach Brad Stevens, who coached Smith at Butler, said, "He was special. He was tough."

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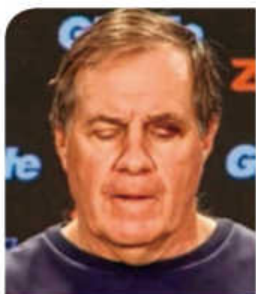


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The Eyes Have It

A brief history of blackened peepers

WHEN BILL BELICHICK showed up at a press conference with a black eye, no one was surprised that he refused to explain it. The taciturn Patriots' coach is not the first sports figure to face the public with a mysterious shiner.



**PATRIOTS COACH
BILL BELICHICK**
First sighted: Jan. 12, 2016
Side: Left
Severity: Love tap from a kindergartner
Rumored cause: None
Comment: "I think I'll live."



**GOLFER
ROBERT ALLENBY**
First sighted: Jan. 16, 2015
Side: Left
Severity: Wrestling match with cheese grater
Rumored cause: Said he was beaten, robbed, dumped from a car; police never determined cause
Comment: "We think this only happens in the movies."



**CAVS GUARD
KYRIE IRVING**
First sighted: Nov. 15, 2013
Side: Right
Severity: Dictionary falling off a bookshelf
Rumored cause: Locker room fight with backcourt mate Dion Waiters
Comment: None



**YANKEES RIGHTY
A.J. BURNETT**
First sighted: Sept. 17, 2010
Side: Right
Severity: MMA sparring session
Rumored cause: Brawl with pitching coach Dave Eiland, who was let go a month later
Comment: "It makes me look tough."

THEY SAID IT

**"THIS L
IS 100%
YOUR
FAULT."**

@MrHarryPotter

Steelers "fan" tweeting at Isaac Redman, a retired back who wore number 33 in Pittsburgh in 2013, about Fitzgerald Toussaint's fumble against the Broncos.



The Capitals

Winners of 12 straight at home through Monday. Who says nothing works in D.C.?



HOT ▲
NOT ▼



NHL

Thug turned fan-elected All-Star captain John Scott was traded and is thus ineligible. Suspicious.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Trinidad and Tobago gymnast Marisa Dick invented a new move, which has been named after her.

**Crystal Dangerfield** | Murfreesboro, Tenn. | Basketball

Crystal, a 5' 6" senior point guard at Blackman High, scored a game-high 30 points in a 60–59 win over Oakland High. A member of the gold-medal-winning under-19 world championship team in 2015 and a two-time Gatorade player of the year in Tennessee, she led the Lady Blaze to a second straight 3A title last year. Crystal has committed to Connecticut.

**Khalid Kareem** | Farmington, Mich. | Football

Khalid, a 6' 4", 250-pound defensive end and a recent graduate of Harrison High in Farmington Hills, returned one fumble 78 yards and another for 14 yards and a score to help East beat the West 28–13 in the Semper Fidelis All-American Bowl; he was named MVP. Last season he had 56 tackles, 36 for loss, and 16 sacks. Khalid will play at Notre Dame.

**Cali Konek** | North Huntingdon, Pa. | Basketball

Cali, a 5' 5" freshman guard at Imani Christian Academy, a Class A school in Pittsburgh, scored 54 points in an 80–74 win over Class 4A Woodland Hills High. It was the fifth time she had gone for 50 or more in the Lady Saints' first 14 games. Cali was averaging 45.4 points at week's end, second best in the nation, with 6.9 rebounds, 5.1 assists and 4.2 steals.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By ALEXANDRA FENWICK

**Will Scott** | Coralville, Iowa | Swimming

Will, a senior at Iowa City West High, swept the 50- (20.79 seconds) and 100-yard freestyles (46.25) and had the field's best splits in the 200 and 400 free relays to lead the two-time defending state champions to the Linn-Mar Invite title. His 20.15 anchor leg in the 200 erased a 1.2-second deficit to beat the Wisconsin Division 2 state champs Monona Grove High.

**Kanzy El Defrawy** | Cairo, Egypt | Squash

El Defrawy, a senior co-captain at Trinity College, swept the clinching match—allowing just eight points—in a home-opening 7–2 victory over Dartmouth. A three-time New England Small College Athletic Conference player of the year, she was runner-up in the College Squash Association's A Division singles last season.

**Tyler Rowe** | East Hartford, Conn. | Basketball

Rowe, a 5' 10" freshman guard at Connecticut College, hit back-to-back game-winners to help the Camels extend their victory streak to five. He made a layup with 16.1 seconds left in an 82–81 win over Middlebury, then buried a buzzer-beating 20-footer to beat City College of New York 77–75. Rowe was averaging 13.5 points and 3.8 assists through Sunday.



Sports Illustrated
HIGH SCHOOL
ATHLETE OF THE MONTH

Presented by
THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

■ While most high schoolers were likely sleeping, Daijon Smith—a 6-foot, 182-pound senior shooting guard and small forward from Harper Woods High, outside Detroit—huddled with a group of elementary schoolers on a recent Saturday morning. The varsity co-captain, 17, was there as a coach for N.U.M.E.N. (Neighborhood United Maximum Effort Now), a youth-basketball organization that he helped to transform from a youth camp with 40 kids into a full-fledged league that now boasts 150 members; he recruited many of the players as well as more than a dozen of his peers to serve as coaches and refs. Daijon also volunteers as an assistant for the Harper Woods Middle School teams, sprinting between their practices and his own after school. Says N.U.M.E.N. founder Will Smith, “He’s a young man you can depend on.” For more of Daijon’s story, visit SI.com/HSathlete

Nominate Now ▼

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to SI.com/faces. For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.



JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by DAN PATRICK

DAN PATRICK: *How tall are you?*

PAXTON LYNCH: I'll have to get my dad to get the tape measure.

DP: *Is your dad there?*

PL: Yes, my dad is standing here.

DP: *Are you going to go barefoot?*

PL: That's the real way to measure it, so I guess we will.

DP: *I guess we'll have to trust your dad.*

PL: My dad has the tape measure out. We get this question quite a lot. I've got the shoes off right now.

DP: *What's it say?*

PL: Just under 6' 7".

DP: *With spikes, you're over 6' 7". [Broncos backup quarterback] Brock Osweiler [6' 8"] told me he was once worried that if he [said he] was 6' 8", people would think he couldn't play the position. Are you hearing you can be too tall as a quarterback?*

PL: No, I've never heard that. I don't see anything wrong with it, except most tall guys aren't really that athletic.

DP: *Are you athletic?*

PL: I'd like to think so, yes.

DP: *Are you deceptively athletic?*

PL: Definitely. I've heard that term all too often in my playing career.

DP: *What does "deceptively*



PAXTON LYNCH

QUALITY HIGH

The Memphis junior, who completed 66.8% of his passes for 3,776 yards and 28 touchdowns in 2015, could be standing tall in the pocket next season as the first quarterback taken in the NFL draft.

athletic" even mean?

PL: If you saw me walk out onto the football field, most people wouldn't expect me to move around the way I move around.

DP: *Who have you been compared to?*

PL: Obviously people have compared me to Brock Osweiler just because of the height. I read some stuff about [6' 5"] Ben Roethlisberger as well.

DP: *Did you always play quarterback?*

PL: No. When I first started, I played running back. I played running back through Pop Warner. My freshman year [at Trinity Christian Academy in Deltona, Fla.] my coach wanted to bump me up to varsity and play quarterback. I told him I had never played quarterback before, but he said, "You're too tall to play running back. You're gonna have to play quarterback eventually."

DP: *How many scholarship offers did you have?*

PL: Coming out of high school, I had offers from Bethune-Cookman and FAMU. Memphis offered me [a scholarship] the last weekend before signing day. On the morning of signing day, Central Florida called, but I had already made my decision. I only had offers from two D-I [FBS] schools.

DP: *You would have been extremely, deceptively athletic at those [non-FBS] schools.*

PL: I'd like to think so. [Laughs.]

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Alabama coach
Nick Saban
told me he

doesn't have the itch to return to the NFL. "I think that there was a time for me, and that's when I went to the Dolphins [from 2005 to '06]," Saban said. "I did that and learned a lot about myself and about some of the things that are difficult to change in the NFL." ... Former NFL guard and current



ESPN analyst
Mark Schlereth

took issue with Peyton Manning's play-calling. "Everything he calls at the line of scrimmage irritates me," Schlereth said. "When you sit in your stance [on the line] for 25 seconds, it creates a situation where you lack aggression." ... Hall of Fame WR



James Lofton
shared the key

to Larry Fitzgerald's success: "Remember when we were 13 and we thought we were faster than our dad, but he just outmuscled us at every turn? That's Larry Fitzgerald. He [simply] outmuscles guys at every turn."

The Case for . . . Chip Kelly

BY MELISSA JACOBS

A SECOND CHANCE:

Imagine if one hadn't been granted the Patriots' Bill Belichick after he flamed out in his first stint as a head coach with the Browns in 1996? Or what if Steve Jobs hadn't been rehired by Apple after being pushed out of the company he helped create?

Calling Chip Kelly's migration from Philadelphia's land of judgment to Silicon Valley's nation of innovation a second chance is actually a bit odd given his track record. In three years with the Eagles, Kelly's record was better than .500 while fielding quarterbacks named Sam Bradford, Nick Foles, Mark Sanchez and Michael Vick. Under Kelly's tutelage Foles was named to the Pro Bowl in 2013; when he was shipped off to St. Louis, he was eventually benched for Case Keenum. But in the NFL you are as good as your most recent headlines, and in Kelly's case those told of a disappointing 6–9 season following an ill-fated power grab to commandeer control over personnel decisions. He was fired before Week 17.

So despite some success in the NFL, and four BCS bowl appearances in four years at Oregon before that, Kelly heads to San Francisco searching for a new beginning. And Chip Kelly 2.0 is presumably a changed man, focused solely on coaching while GM Trent Baalke handles personnel. Truth is, Kelly won't need



to play mad scientist with the 49ers' roster because his centerpiece is already in place. Colin Kaepernick—who, like his new coach, has experienced an abrupt fall from grace—is the perfect quarterback for the Kelly system, which uses sight reads instead of audibles, operates out of the shotgun, moves at high-octane speed and relies on a multidimensional running game. Kaepernick led the Niners to a 21–7–1 record in two seasons as a dangerous, prolific read-option threat, yet after coach Jim Harbaugh left, a new regime tried to mold Kaepernick into a pocket-passing game manager. Kelly

⏏
Kaepernick
is the
perfect
quarterback
for the
Kelly
system.

should help Kaepernick rediscover the better parts of his game.

Kelly and Kaepernick will be assisted by an offensive line on the mend (center Daniel Kilgore from a broken left leg and guard Alex Boone from a torn right MCL), and they should receive a boost when right tackle Anthony Davis returns after a one-year sabbatical from football.

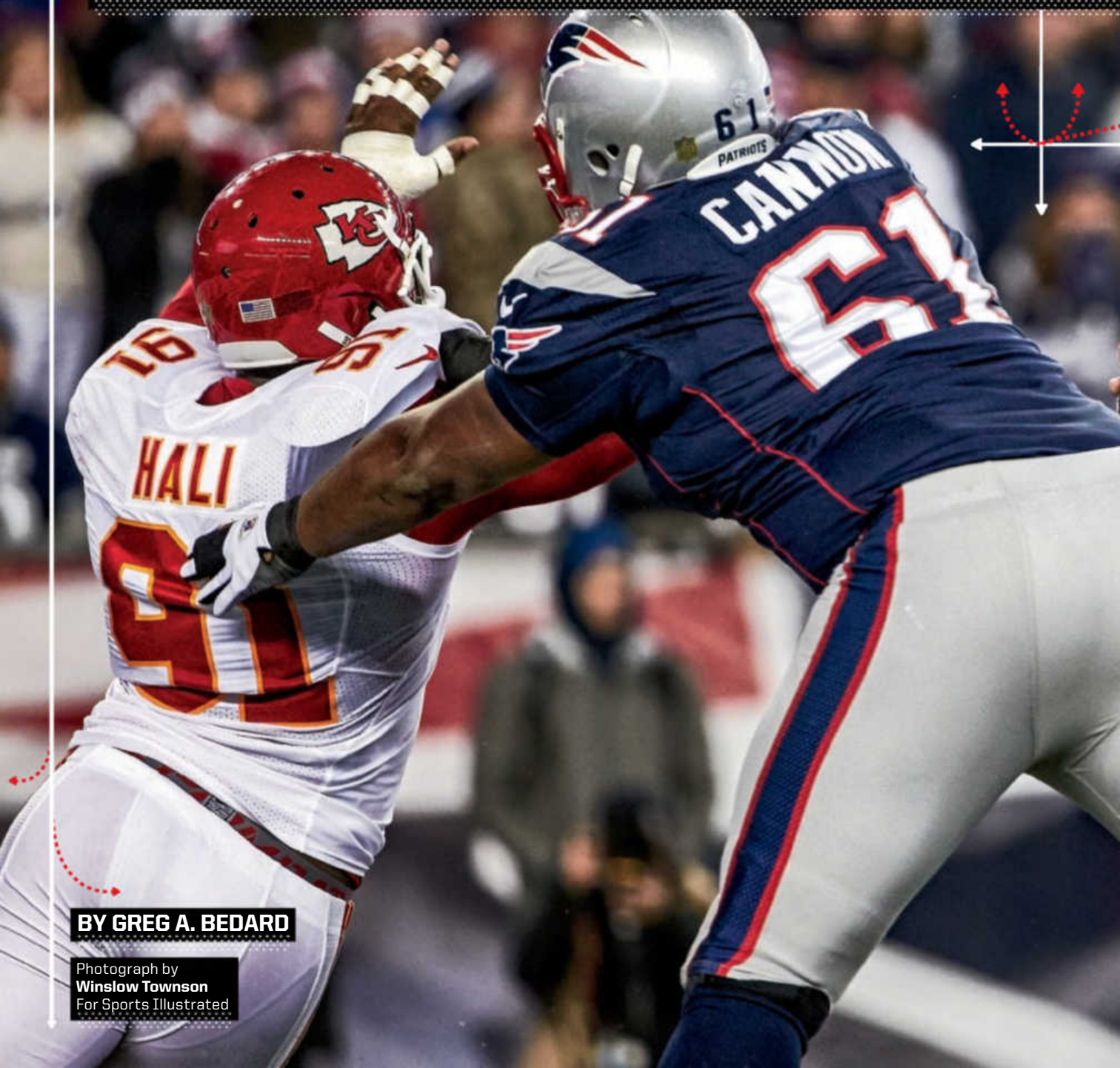
Of course, the issues in Santa Clara have extended beyond a thin roster and poor performance. The front office has been fraught with infighting and suspect decisions. CEO Jed York has borne the blame for replacing Harbaugh with defensive line coach Jim Tomsula after the 2014 season. (Harbaugh's blink-of-an-eye turnaround of Michigan has been a gut punch to 49ers management and the team's fans.) If anyone needs a second chance, it's York, who openly asked for one during a Jan. 4 press conference to announce the firing of Tomsula after one season. No-shows have become common at the 49ers' shiny new stadium.

Kelly's emphasis on sports science—GPS systems, heart-rate monitors, accelerometers, personalized smoothies—may be too rigid for some, but you needn't be a Belichickian to understand that decoding these competitive advantages goes a long way in the salary-capped NFL. Players and fans will embrace anything that results in wins, especially in San Francisco, about to host a Super Bowl in which it almost never had a shot to play.

After a pulseless 5–11 season, the 49ers didn't need an upgrade; they needed a system overhaul. They have to think different. □

CH-CH-CH-CH-CH

CHOICE ROUTES, OPTIONS, CONVERSIONS... EVERYTHING'S
NEW ENGLAND—TOM BRADY & CO. ARE PLAYING IN A FIFTH
CHAMPIONSHIP GAME—BECAUSE OF AN OFFENSE BUILT TO A



BY GREG A. BEDARD

Photograph by
Winslow Townson
For Sports Illustrated

ANGES

EXACTLY THE SAME IN
STRAIGHT CONFERENCE

DAPT



DIVISIONAL

PLAYOFFS

EXOTIC BIRDS in cages screech every few seconds in the background, their shrill cries echoing off the walls, the tile floor and the sliding glass doors inside this South Florida echo chamber. Outside, beyond the back patio and the pool, is a stable of six horses and a large riding area—typical stuff for this equestrian community near West Palm Beach. Maybe it's this bewildering backdrop, or maybe it's the fact that it's four days before Christmas and it's 85° and humid. Something is making

this a maddening experience, trying to get on the same page with Charlie Weis about the Patriots' offense.

"No, it's not a *sight adjustment*, it's just what he does on the route," says the 59-year-old Weis, who 16 years ago, in his first season as the team's offensive coordinator, installed the offense that the Patriots still use (with some modifications) today. Now retired from the game, he is being extremely patient with his guest. But he's also a little frustrated.

Squawk!

Choice routes. Option routes. Route conversions. Sight adjustments. And the rules aren't the same for a drop-back pass versus play-action. In the game film playing on a laptop, Tom Brady yells at his receivers and. . .

Squawk!

Sitting at Weis's dining table, one begins to understand what makes the Patriots' offense so difficult for even New England's own receivers to comprehend—and so tough for opponents to defend, no matter the caliber of pass catcher number 12 is throwing to. Last Saturday it was the Chiefs who left Gillette Stadium shaking their heads, like so many other Super Bowl hopefuls before them, after Brady and this offense got the better of them, 27–20, to advance to the AFC championship game. Again.

"Not every offense does this, but this is our offense," says Weis, who, having left New England on good terms in 2005 to become the coach at Notre Dame, is basically a lifetime member of the Patriots' *familia*. "I don't know why [other teams] don't do it. I don't know why you would want to do it any other way."

Squawk!

ON THE OCCASION of Brady's record 22nd playoff win, let's set the story straight on a bit of mythology surrounding the quarterback's rise: Pats coach Bill Belichick was *not* looking for a reason to bench starter Drew Bledsoe back in 2001 when Jets linebacker Mo Lewis hit the QB so hard that he put Bledsoe in the hospital. Actually, another New England passer, Damon Huard, very well could have been the man to fill Bledsoe's shoes—the competition was that close.

"Oh no, no, no, no," Weis says of that popular tale, the one that has Brady, a Belichick draft pick, waiting in the wings behind owner Robert Kraft's preferred leader, Bledsoe. "[Brady] wasn't better than Bledsoe. In fact he wasn't much better than [Huard]. Bledsoe was clearly the starter. The No. 2 spot, *that's* where the competition was. We really could have flipped a coin to pick the second guy. We ended up picking Tommy—but it was *really* close."

But this isn't a story about Brady's ascension, which has him headed to his 10th conference championship game. This is about a perfect marriage between a QB and an offense—an offense that, if executed correctly, is almost unstoppable. Take any of the herky-jerky option routes that ace slotman Julian Edelman converted into 10 catches for 100 yards against Kansas City. "I've played in a lot of different offenses," says QB Brian Hoyer, who after starting his career in New England landed this season with Houston. "[The Patriots'] system is a hybrid of all of them. It's very intricate, but if you have guys who can do it well, it's the best. And if, in that offense, you have the best QB ever to play the game? Well. . . ."

At the heart of that system is the responsibility heaped upon the QB's shoulders. That starts with the "alert" system, in which most play calls are essentially



two-in-one. There's the original call, plus an alternate that gets put into motion if the D aligns a certain way. Brady yells, "Alert!" to make the switch. (The Patriots didn't need an alert call against the Chiefs until Steven Jackson's two-yard run with 11:47 left in the fourth quarter—that's how attuned coordinator Josh McDaniels was to his play-calls.) In New England there are also "look" passes: run plays that are converted to quick dump-offs should Brady see a corner playing well off a receiver. (Most offenses now include some form of this.)

But what truly separates the Patriots' system is the extensive combination of receiver route adjustments, based on the defense or a defender's positioning, that all pass catchers—even running backs—have to know. Most offenses include at least a sprinkling of option routes designed, essentially, to use a defense against itself. But New England's offense is *built* on them.

"At times there are four decisions that a receiver needs to make after the snap," Chad O'Shea, New England's receivers coach since 2009, explained in the lead-up to Super Bowl XLVI, a loss to the Giants. "That's one advantage of our offense: We give players the flexibility to take what the defense gives."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: WINSLOW/TOWNSEND FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; CHARLES KRUPA/AP; JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES; DAMIAN STRONHEIMER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

MAJOR TOM

*The five pass catchers who have best meshed with **BRADY** (and the Patriots' scheme) over the past decade*

—G.A.B.



1 WES WELKER
2007-12: 672 REC, 37 TDS

He was only 5' 9", but he was fearless over the middle, making him the master of the choice route. "To run across the middle at full speed while looking at the QB... that's a very rare gift," Brady has said of his old pal.



2 KEVIN FAULK
1999-2011: 431 REC, 15 TDS

The Tom Brady of running backs, he read pressures and coverages like his QB, with whom he was always in sync in terms of picking up blitzes and running choice routes out of the backfield.



3 ROB GRONKOWSKI
2010-PRESENT: 380 REC, 65 TDS

Not exactly a rocket scientist in cleats, but he's floored coaches with his instincts against coverages. "He understood leverage immediately," says O'Brien. "He knew, *This guy's outside me, I'm going to lean into him.*"



CHARLIE'S SHEEN

The O created by Weis (far right, in 2003)—with some tweaks—still shines. Just ask Gronk (87), who torched K.C. for two TDs.

That complexity can prove maddening for rookies and veterans imported from other teams who are trying to learn the system. Consider: Since taking Deion Branch (round 2) and David Givens (round 7) in 2002, the Patriots' track record at drafting receivers has been abysmal. Since then they've selected eight wideouts in the fifth round or higher, 11 overall. And from Bethel Johnson (round 2, '03) to Aaron Dobson (round 2, '13), almost all failed. The only success story: a seventh-rounder in '09 named Julian Edelman. "You know why he made it, right?" Weis asks of the player who after missing seven games with a broken foot revived a stagnant offense last Saturday. "Because he was a college quarterback. He thinks like a quarterback. He's

really sharp." (New England's success rate in free agency might be even worse: David Terrell, '05; Joey Galloway, '09; Chad Ochocinco, '11; Reggie Wayne, '15. . .)

So, what kind of receiver *does* work in this offense? What does it take? In short, smarts—and practice. "I use the example of Deion Branch and the hours of work he put in with [Brady]," says Texans coach Bill O'Brien, who worked on the Patriots' O from 2007 through '11 and brought the system to Houston in '14. "I'd say the same thing about [Rob] Gronkowski. During Gronk's rookie year, [Brady] would keep that kid after practice for hours. We'd say, 'Tom, you're going to kill this guy.'"

Brady has admitted he's not the easiest QB to play with. Against the Chiefs he made clear his displeasures with Edelman and shot a frustrated glance at Brandon LaFell after the receiver shortened a route. "If you haven't weeded out the guys that you don't count on anymore, those guys, they're not playing," Brady told reporters last week. "The guys that you count on, those are the guys that you're kind of in a foxhole with. . . You've got to know who to count on."

WHAT, EXACTLY, is so complicated? Why is New England the place that rookies and once productive receivers—with rare exception—go to see their careers extinguished?

On most plays, every eligible receiver is expected to be able to adjust his route—and this after Brady may have alerted to an alternate play—depending on the defense. Here's a rundown of the different types of route modifications New England runs:

ROUTE CONVERSION If a play is designed for, say, a comeback route (or a hitch) and the defender is playing in press man instead of the anticipated



4 RANDY MOSS 2007-10: 259 REC, 50 TDS

The Patriots have never had an X receiver master route conversions like the future Hall of Famer. Brady and his coaches raved that the mercurial Moss had one of the highest football IQs ever and was a terrific practice player.

5 JULIAN EDELMAN 2009-PRESENT: 327 REC, 21 TDS

It took him four years to get a shot in this O—by the time he's done, he'll climb this list. Edelman is the best athlete Brady has had in the slot: His ability to cut on a dime and maintain speed makes his choice routes very tough to defend.

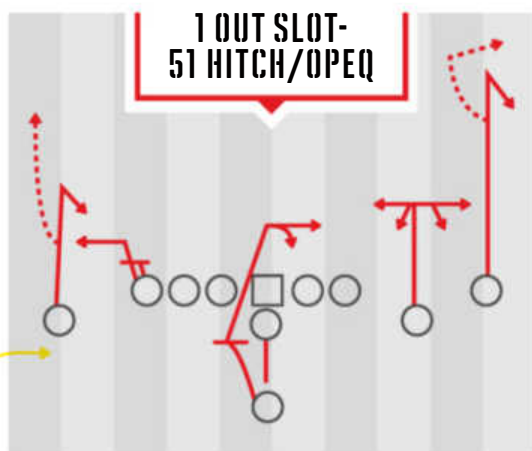


zone coverage, a receiver might convert his route to a fade down the sideline.

SIGHT ADJUSTMENT If a receiver recognizes that his defender—usually a safety—is coming on a blitz, he'll *adjust* his route. (Simply put: Conversions are based on coverage type, adjustments react to blitzing DBs.) A vertical route, for example, might adjust to a slant, getting the receiver open more quickly in the void the safety just created. This is different from a hot route, which most teams use to thwart front-seven blitzes and which are usually executed by tight ends or backs.

CHOICE ROUTE Referred to by some teams as a “two-way go,” this usually occurs with a tight end or an outside receiver. In essence, if the defender plays you inside, you break outside. If there are two split safeties in the middle of the field (termed “middle of field open”), a receiver may split them; against one safety (“middle closed”), the receiver would stay in the seam.

OPTION ROUTE This almost always involves the slot receiver playing off the defense. Against a zone, for example, he'll sit down for a short pass. Against man coverage, he could break right, left or go deep depending on the positioning and the skills of the man in coverage. On the Patriots' first third-down attempt against the Chiefs, Edelman took the option to turn for a seven-yard pass and then spun for another four. To see what these concepts might look like in execution, let's examine a play design from an old Weis playbook:



1 OUT SLOT-51 HITCH/OPEQ, which is almost certainly still in the Pats' arsenal. It starts in a three-receiver set, one to the left and two to the right; the quarterback under center, with a single back behind him; and the tight end on the left side of the line. The left-aligned receiver runs a six-yard hitch, but that route converts to a fade if he sees press coverage or if the safeties roll coverage down to his side. The tight

AS DENVER

PEYTON MANNING's season has been filled with Pittsburgh he extended it for another episode: a must-



THE OLD

man dressed at his locker, tugging on his checkered blue suit and knotting

his red tie with blue stripes. By that point it didn't matter that his passes had wobbled like wounded seagulls on this windy Sunday afternoon in Denver. Or that his receivers reacted to those throws as if they were allergic to pigskin, dropping at least seven. Or that few seemed to consider his Broncos anything other than the worst team remaining in the playoffs, despite their 23-16 win over the Steelers.

What mattered to Peyton Manning was that he had extended his season by another week and was returning to another AFC championship game and adding another chapter—perhaps the last—in one of the most storied rivalries in sports. That would be Brady-Manning, as in Tom and Peyton, two quarterbacks who have defined a generation. Sunday, in their 17th showdown, they will play for a spot in Super Bowl 50.

When Manning strode into the interview room that narrative had already been established. He felt no need to contribute to it. He answered two questions about Brady and the Patriots without saying the words *Brady* or *Patriots*. He wanted to enjoy this win first.

As the fourth quarter started, Denver trailed 13-12, even though Pittsburgh was without its leading receiver (Antonio Brown, concussion) and rusher (DeAngelo Williams, right foot). The home crowd at Mile High began to boo, offended by the offense. The jeers seemed to center, in large part, on the 39-year-old Manning, who was embroiled in the strangest of his 18 seasons. He was pulled from a loss to the Chiefs in Week 10 after throwing four interceptions, missed six games after he tore the plantar fascia near his left heel and then returned in the regular-season finale, replacing Brock Osweiler, to guide a come-

ER TURNS

more plot twists than a daytime drama, and by beating
-see showdown with Tom Brady —by GREG BISHOP

from-behind 27-20 win over the Chargers—while angrily denying an Al Jazeera report that loosely linked him to HGH use.

Manning's—and Denver's—resilience was evident on Sunday, especially early in the fourth quarter, when Manning fell down, stood up and found receiver Emmanuel Sanders downfield for a 34-yard gain (a play he said he'd like to erase from the film reel on Monday morning). And also when cornerback Bradley Roby forced a fumble by running back Fitzgerald Toussaint. Rush end DeMarcus Ware recovered it to set up a 13-play, 6:52 drive that culminated in C.J. Anderson's one-yard run for the go-ahead touchdown.

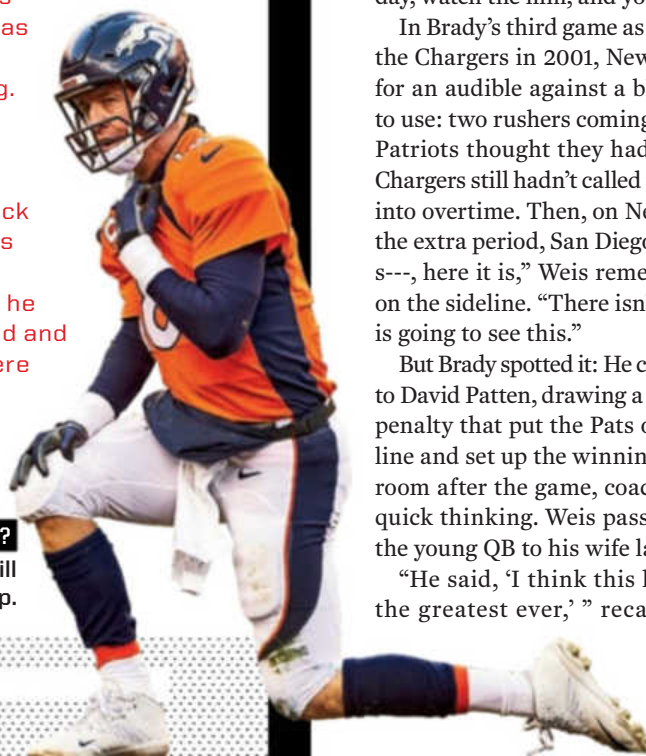
Manning finished with 21 completions in 37 attempts for 222 yards. But his most poignant connection took place after the final horn sounded, when he handed the game ball to receiver Demaryius Thomas and told him to give it to his mother, Katina Smith. While Thomas was becoming an NFL star, Smith was serving a 15-year prison term for her role in a cocaine trafficking ring. She had never seen her son play in person until Sunday.

What she saw was a Broncos team with an old man at quarterback that rode a dominant defense to its 10th win by seven points or fewer. As Thomas exited the locker room, he carried the football in his right hand and met his mother in the corridor, where they embraced.

The most debated rivalry in sports could wait. At least until Monday morning.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

For the fifth time, Manning will play for the AFC championship.



end blocks but then releases into the left flat if the play breaks down and extends. The running back picks up the middle linebacker if he blitzes; if he doesn't, the back runs a middle check-down and then can release in the opposite direction of the tight end. On the right, the slot receiver runs a six-yard option route that can be a comeback, curl, dig or out, depending on the coverage. The outside receiver to the right runs a 14-yard comeback that converts to a post-corner if the safeties roll coverage.

Got it? Now imagine that you're a wideout, and the coach tells you that instead of being the Z receiver, as you were the previous two weeks, you're going to be the X on this play this week. "It's very hard [to learn] because we're constantly putting people in different spots, so you have to know multiple positions," says Hoyer of the Texans' version of the system. "You have to make adjustments on the fly relating to coverage. It can be a lot, especially if you've played five years in a system where your route is predetermined."

The magic of the system boils down to receivers interpreting a defense the exact same way—and as quickly—as the quarterback, putting themselves exactly where the QB expects. Good luck with that, especially with Brady at the helm.

"I don't know if I've ever met anyone who reads coverages as quickly and correctly," says Weis, who still texts with Brady weekly. "[When I was there] you could count on one hand the times he saw something incorrectly. He'd come over to the sideline, and I'd say, 'They were in quarters coverage.' And he'd say, 'But they were moving to [cover] five.' You'd go back the next day, watch the film, and you could see what he saw."

In Brady's third game as a starter, at home against the Chargers in 2001, New England game-planned for an audible against a blitz that San Diego liked to use: two rushers coming from the weak side. The Patriots thought they had a great answer, but the Chargers still hadn't called the blitz as the game went into overtime. Then, on New England's first play of the extra period, San Diego dialed up the blitz. "Oh, s---, here it is," Weis remembers saying to himself on the sideline. "There isn't a chance in hell the kid is going to see this."

But Brady spotted it: He checked off and threw deep to David Patten, drawing a 37-yard pass-interference penalty that put the Pats on the Chargers' 40-yard line and set up the winning field goal. In the locker room after the game, coaches marveled at Brady's quick thinking. Weis passed on his feelings about the young QB to his wife later that night.

"He said, 'I think this kid is going to be one of the greatest ever,'" recalls Maura Weis, just in

from practicing her dressage in the backyard. “I asked him, ‘Like Joe Montana?’ ” referring to her husband’s former Notre Dame classmate.

“Maybe better.”

MAKING THINGS even harder for modern-day Patriots is the sheer volume of material that has been layered on since those nascent days under Weis (who, to be fair, didn’t exactly invent the whole scheme—he built on a system that New England assistants Ron Erhardt and Ray Perkins created in the 1970s and then brought to the Giants, where Weis learned it in the early ’90s). When Weis left for Notre Dame, he had in his playbook 50 individual routes, 29 two-man routes, 11 three-man combinations and four miscellaneous routes. Later, McDaniels took over as offensive coordinator and put his spin on the

playbook, as did O’Brien after McDaniels left to coach the Broncos in ’09. (McDaniels returned to run New England’s offense in ’12.) When O’Brien arrived in Houston last year, his first Texans playbook included 109 individual routes, 110 two-man combinations, 67 three-man concepts and 44 miscellaneous routes. “Charlie installed [this offense],” says Hoyer, but “from seeing old call sheets, watching old film, it was very toned down. Now it’s nowhere near where it was in 2000, with the alerts and all that stuff. Brady . . . is constantly adding stuff.”

When Brady is surrounded by talented players who know the system and can execute it—like the group the Patriots had during the bulk of their 10–0 start, with Gronkowski, Edelman, receiver Danny Amendola and running back Dion Lewis mostly healthy—this offense can make sweet, unstoppable music. And when Brady doesn’t have that luxury? Whoever those players are, they won’t be staying around for long. “There were a couple guys in our past, he wouldn’t throw the ball to them,” says Weis. “You’d get pissed and say, ‘Why didn’t you throw to him?’ He’d answer, ‘I didn’t trust him.’ Which is not really a bad answer. It’s not the *right* answer, but it’s not a bad answer.” □

THE PICKS

by
GREG A.
BEDARD

A F C

→ CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

N F C



PATRIOTS *AT* BRONCOS
SUNDAY, JAN. 24; 3:05 P.M. ET

THERE WILL BE
rabid coverage of

these two old QBs, but this game will come down to the Broncos’ running backs and the Patriots’ linebackers. In the first meeting between these two teams, in Week 12, when Peyton Manning sat with a left foot injury, Denver’s C.J. Anderson and Ronnie Hillman rushed a combined 29 times for 172 yards and three TDs in a 30–24 overtime victory. You can chalk that up to blown gap assignments up front by New England, which didn’t have its two best backers (Jamie Collins and Dont’a Hightower) to clean up. Now both are banged up again. If the Pats don’t have them on Sunday (Hightower is the key; he’s the best run stopper), Manning will get the type of run-game production he needs to be effective—and yet that still won’t be enough. Against Denver’s top-ranked D, Tom Brady was able to move the ball without receivers Julian Edelman and Danny Amendola (and with Rob Gronkowski out in the fourth quarter). Brady has all those weapons back, and that spells mile-high trouble. **Patriots 42, Broncos 17**



I’M CHANGING
my pick from the

Cardinals. Over the regular season I fell hard for Arizona’s deep roster, Carson Palmer’s total command of an aggressive offense and coach Bruce Arians’s gutsy play-calling. But the bloom is off Palmer and Arians after a 26–20 overtime victory over the Packers in the divisional round. The 36-year-old Palmer was so jittery and unsure of himself down the stretch—I count at least two potential fourth-quarter picks that Packers DBs left on the field—that I grew to suspect he was wearing an old Bengals jersey under his pads. And Arians’s admired devil-may-care game management was exposed as smoke-and-mirror shtick; against Green Bay he showed no ability to make the nuanced decisions needed for his team to win. The Panthers turn mistakes into points, and their multiple running game—Jonathan Stewart, **Cam Newton**, Mike Tolbert—and varied pass rush will be too much for Arizona to handle on the road. **Panthers 34, Cardinals 23**

CARDINALS *AT* PANTHERS
SUNDAY, JAN. 24; 6:40 P.M. ET





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AS JULY TURNED to August, and August to September, the game Dwight Freeney loved forced him to make an honest assessment of his future. His skills? Eroding. His power? Uneven. His motivation? Fading. He knew then that it was time—time to return to football.

And, improbably, there was Freeney last Saturday, hurrying and harassing quarterback Aaron Rodgers into a sack in the fourth quarter of the Cardinals' 26–20 divisional-round victory over the Packers. This was, of course, a marked contrast from three months earlier, when Arizona brass found the 35-year-old defensive end on his favorite Indianapolis-area golf courses, surrounded by divots, missing putts and shanking drives. As a veteran of 13 NFL seasons, Freeney's golf game had come to adhere to the off-season calendar: His scores peaked in mid-July, right before training camp. Only this year, there was no camp; his game peaked as usual, then it crashed. There was no contract offer. Only the wrong teams—bad teams—even bothered to check in. "My game went south," says Freeney. "I broke 80 for the first time this summer. Then I fell apart."

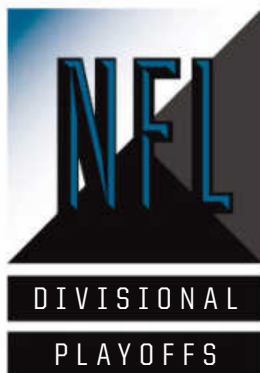
September passed without the kind of offer he wanted, from a playoff contender. One-third of October flew by too. Every Sunday, Freeney watched a handful of plays on TV, only to storm out of his house in frustration and head to the golf course. Fellow duffers wondered why he wasn't at home, keeping up with the game from afar. "Who cares?" Freeney told them. "I'm not playing!"

Eventually, he stopped watching football altogether. On Oct. 11, the fifth Sunday of the season, he told himself, "If one more week goes by and I don't get that call, I'm retiring."

The Cardinals beat the Lions that afternoon, 42–17, to improve to 4–1. But in their lopsided victory they also lost outside linebacker Alex Okafor (strained right calf) and reserve backer Kenny Demens (left ACL).

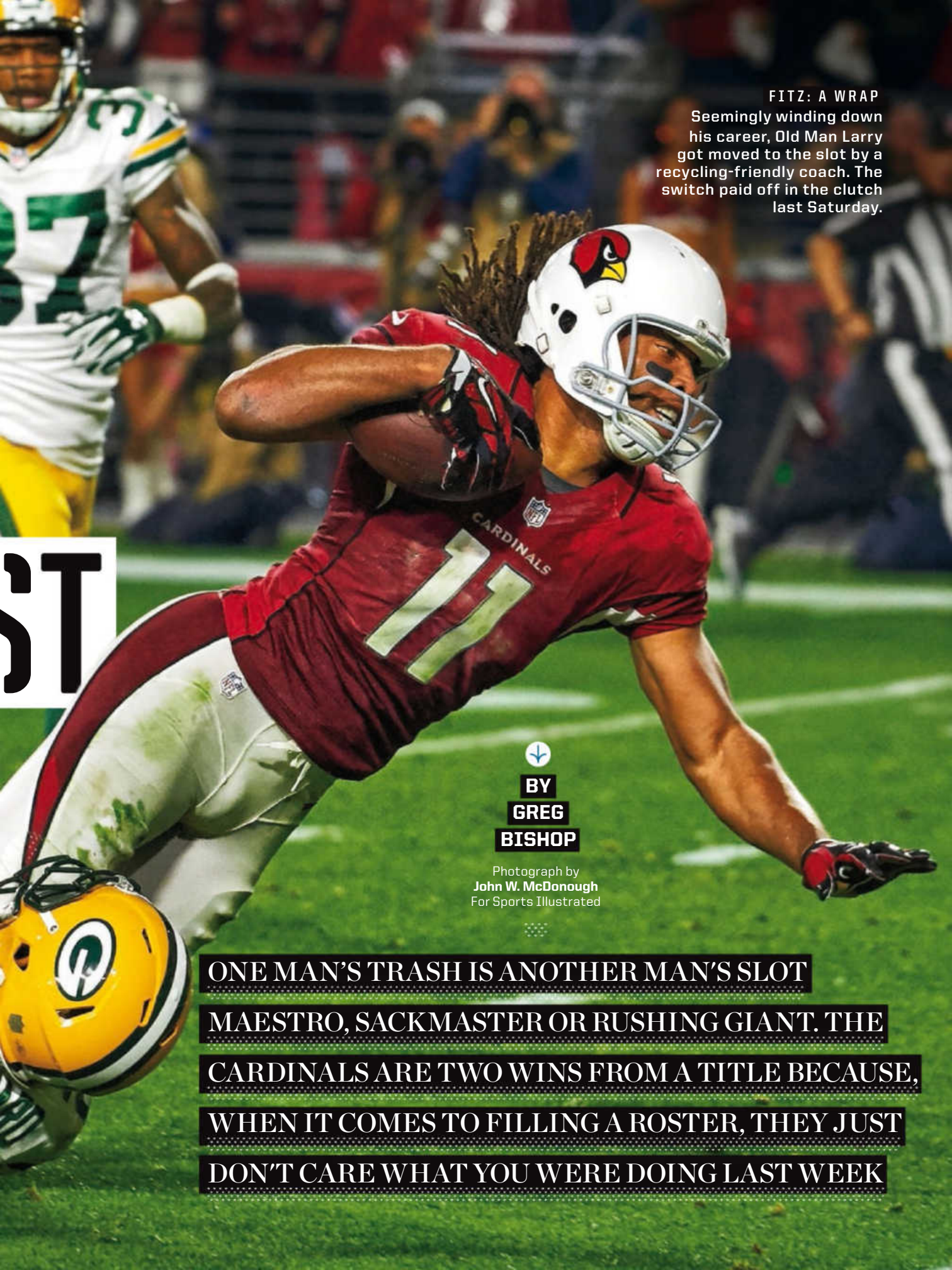
Quentin Harris, Arizona's director of pro scouting, knew exactly where to find a replacement. The Cardinals keep two logs: an Excel database of between 1,500 and 2,000 players they want to keep eyes on; and what they call their Ready List of the five to 10 best-available options at every position. Harris knew one name on that Ready List well. Freeney, a pass-rush specialist with 111½ career sacks in the NFL, had been his college teammate at Syracuse.

Most teams looked at Freeney and saw a Hall of Famer who'd passed his expiration date. The Cardinals are not most teams. They're not afraid to pursue guys their competitors



THE READY LIST





FITZ: A WRAP

Seemingly winding down his career, Old Man Larry got moved to the slot by a recycling-friendly coach. The switch paid off in the clutch last Saturday.

ST



BY
**GREG
BISHOP**

Photograph by
John W. McDonough
For Sports Illustrated

ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S SLOT

MAESTRO, SACKMASTER OR RUSHING GIANT. THE

CARDINALS ARE TWO WINS FROM A TITLE BECAUSE,

WHEN IT COMES TO FILLING A ROSTER, THEY JUST

DON'T CARE WHAT YOU WERE DOING LAST WEEK

have ignored, to deploy newcomers the week they're signed—or to pull a contributor off the golf course in the middle of the season. "They're not the only team that does that," says Gil Brandt, VP of player personnel for the Cowboys from 1960 to '89 and a legend among front-office types. "But they're the most extreme."

Arizona's decision-makers cared less about Freeney's sack numbers over the previous two seasons—four total with the Chargers—and more about the consistency with which he hurried quarterbacks. Last year, despite starting just nine games, he was No. 6 among 3–4 outside linebackers, with 53 pressures, according to Pro Football Focus. "He may not have been finishing," says Cardinals general manager Steve Keim, "but he was disruptive as hell."

Harris made the call that stopped Freeney from retiring. Bruce Arians, Arizona's coach, sent a text message: *Hey, man, you ready to roll?*

Freeney responded: *I'm ready. Get me off this golf course. PLEASE!*

What happened next was classic Cardinals team-building. Freeney signed on Oct. 12 and played the following Sunday against the Steelers. He bagged his first sack (Joe Flacco, Ravens) a week after that, on *Monday Night Football*. And in the weeks that followed he sealed a victory over the Vikings with a last-second Teddy Bridgewater strip-sack, dropped Rodgers three times in a regular-season blowout of the Packers (for which he earned NFC Defensive Player of the Week) and piled up a total of eight QB takedowns, over just 11 games. His bagging of Rodgers last Saturday marked his 10th postseason sack, a tally that only 11 other players in NFL history have reached.

Freeney has become one of this season's most improbable success stories. He is also confirmation of the Cardinals' organizational philosophy. On some level, every NFL franchise hunts for creative ways to fill roster holes, or aims to. "But the teams that have a chance to win every year," says Cardinals defensive tackle Red Bryant, "teams like Pittsburgh and New England and Seattle and Green Bay—they do the best job of finding players to fit around their core."

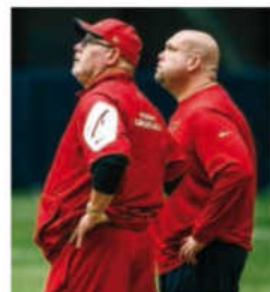
THE CARDINALS' APPROACH is an inexact science that worked with uncanny precision in 2015. They filled out their roster with reclamation projects, players considered too old, too injured, too unstable or too expensive for other teams. Then they went 13–3.

Tyrann Mathieu, the defensive back who had been dismissed from LSU following multiple failed drug tests, played defensive-MVP-caliber football until he tore the ACL in his right knee in Week 15. Running back Chris



MALE-PATTERN BALLSINESS

Freeney (54), a near-retiree, harassed Rodgers, and Palmer (3), a Raiders reject, provided the finishing touch last Saturday. Arians (near right) and Keim get credit for both.



Johnson, on his third team in three seasons, led the Cardinals in rushing (814 yards) until he fractured his left tibia in late November. Safety Deone Bucannon converted to linebacker and led the Cards in tackles (112). On Saturday he had seven more against the Packers.

Quarterback Carson Palmer emerged as a candidate for MVP after recovering from an ACL tear. His top target, Larry Fitzgerald, enjoyed a career-best season (109 receptions, 1,215 yards, nine TDs) at age 32, and he did that from the slot, a relatively new position. Then the two—QB and receiver—carried the Cardinals in the divisional round, connecting for eight receptions and 176 yards. Fitzgerald's 75-yard catch-and-run (and run and run) in overtime set up the winning TD—which, naturally, he scored.

Those are the marquee names, but they only partially account for the fact that this outfit ranked No. 1 on offense this year, No. 5 on defense. This was Arizona: Team Best-Case Scenario.

IT'S EARLY JANUARY, nine days before that playoff showdown against Green Bay, and rain pelts Arizona's facility as the architect of the most-balanced roster in football watches over practice. Keim, 43, wears a neatly trimmed goatee and a cardinal Cardinals hat that covers his bald head. Like every other GM in football, he wants to build primarily through the draft. What makes Keim different is how he rounds out the roster, with castoffs and calculated risks signed to incentive-laden one-year contracts. Freeney, for instance, joined for a base salary of \$684,705, but collected \$200,000 after his fourth sack this season, plus \$100,000 for every two sacks thereafter.

The composition of Keim's 53-man playoff roster—22 drafted players, seven rookie free-agent signings, two players acquired through trades, and 22 free-agent signings—speaks to his look-anywhere, sign-anyone approach. "That's how we want to build," he says (adding, almost sheepishly, "not



every player has worked out”). This philosophy, Keim says, was born of two crucial factors. One is a coaching staff with a combined 222 years of NFL experience. (It’s an insane 480 years if you count college.) Arians and his assistants can school newcomers quickly and are not afraid to play the best players, regardless of draft status or contract size. The other factor is a locker room stocked with veterans who simply don’t care whether the guy next to them was signed last year, last month or last week.

Enter the Ready List. Keim and his staff do the tracking, courting and signing. They consult with coaches and players from their own roster for scouting reports on specific free agents that they know or played with, or they have Cardinals players evaluate potential signees on film. Arizona’s defensive backs, for instance, graded safety D.J. Swearinger as a fit before he signed in December. “Most teams aren’t bringing in guys off the street,” says fellow defensive back Jerraud Powers. “They’ll move a guy up off their own practice squad, because that guy knows their system.”

Once a player signs, Arians and his staff take over. With someone like Freeney, they don’t give him the full playbook; they start with specific packages (like third-and-long) and specific responsibilities (chase the quarterback). With in-season signings like this, Arians considers a 90% success rate to be ideal. And to remind his players that they must compete daily for their jobs, he works out as many as 10 outsiders every Tuesday.

The year before Arians arrived, in 2012, the Cardinals finished 5–11. They’ve won at least 10 games in each season since. Which isn’t to say that Arians, 63, considers himself some sort of football genius. He’s simply more comfortable than most at taking on risk. Case in point: Two O-linemen that the Arians regime chose in the first round of the draft, guard Jonathan Cooper (’13) and tackle D.J. Humphries (’15), hardly even play. At 13–3, who cares?

It’s this performance-is-what-matters philosophy—not just the Kangol hats, or the sunglasses, or the smooth-jazz-station baritone—that players love, that most helps the Cardinals land free agents, says Johnson. The veteran back believes players ultimately want two things: the chance to compete for a job and the chance to win. “If teams talk about competition but don’t play

the best players, that’s known around the league,” he says. “The organizations that don’t win, like Tennessee, they’re also behind the eight ball. [Johnson was cut by the Titans in 2014.] They have to build through the draft. Guys are not going to commit there unless they overpay them. Or if they’re just playing for the money.”

THE SIGNINGS HELP tell the story of the Cardinals’ season. They found Johnson on the free-agent discount rack, six years removed from the 2009 campaign when he gained 2,006 yards and a nickname—CJ2K—that has since been used to mock his decline. He played for the Jets last season, started only six games and gained 663 yards, plus a new, humbling handle: CJ.6K. In August, Arizona pitched him over the phone. They didn’t even fly him in to visit.

Arians was straightforward. He told Johnson he could not promise a starting gig, only a role of yet-to-be-determined size. The then 29-year-old took a week to think it over. “There weren’t exactly a lot of teams beating down my door,” he says.

He signed for \$870,000, plus incentives, then stepped in for an injured Andre Ellington and topped 100 rushing yards four times from Week 3 through Week 8. He was second in the NFL in rushing as the Cardinals started 6–2. “I’m looking around like, Is this for real?” he says. “I was kind of amazed. Like, I’m a part of this? Damn!”

Bryant watched Johnson’s resurgence from his home in Jacksonville, where last year he started 16 games at defensive end. After being released by the Jaguars before training camp and then, in September, by the Bills, Bryant spent the first 11 weeks of 2015 on the

couch. For seven seasons he'd paid for DirecTV's NFL Sunday Ticket package; this was the first time he actually used it. He waited for the phone to ring.

For Thanksgiving, Bryant flew with his family to his hometown of Jasper, Texas. They landed on that Tuesday, and the Cardinals (who were dinged up on the D-line) called on Wednesday, at which point Bryant sped to Houston and barely caught an evening flight. He worked out with the Cardinals on Thursday morning and joined practice that afternoon.

"You can get him ready for next week," Keim told Arians. "Dude, I'm playing him *this weekend*," Arians responded.

That Friday, coaches taught Bryant a handful of standard packages for which he might be useful. He booked a room at a Courtyard by Marriott down the street from the Cardinals' facility, flew on the team plane to San Francisco on Saturday and played 15 snaps against the 49ers on Sunday. Monday, five days after Arizona first called, Bryant needed a massage, Epsom salts and a long spell in the cold tub just to "feel normal again."

Aided by the 6' 5", 323-pound lane-clogger, the Cardinals finished the regular season ranked No. 6 against the run, and as Bryant looked to the future, he targeted two goals: win another Super Bowl (he started for the Seahawks team that stomped the Broncos two seasons ago) and ascend to higher levels in Marriott's rewards program. "I'm trying to get that Platinum," he says.

Swearinger, a former second-round pick out of South Carolina, arrived the week after Bryant and signed to the practice squad on Dec. 1. Cut by the Texans before the season and released by the Bucs for what he says were medical reasons on Nov. 17, he had been hanging with his pets—a French bulldog-pit bull mix named Snowman and a pit bull named Blue—while nursing a sore big toe on his right foot. The week before the Cardinals called, Swearinger worked out for the Packers, who, he says, seemed interested—until he failed a physical.

Ultimately he chose Arizona over Buffalo, and he settled into both a furnished, short-term-lease apartment and the Cardinals' regular defensive-back rotation. In Week 15, his second on the active roster, he played 52 snaps and recovered a fumble in a 40–17 victory over the Eagles. With Mathieu out, his role has only solidified. "I'm just so happy I injured my toe," he says.

The Cardinals won their first NFC West title since 2009 because Johnson had few options and Bryant (with some nudging from his wife) was talked out of retirement and Swearinger bruised his toe badly enough to be released but not badly enough to end his season. Now, Team Best-Case Scenario is two wins from a championship.

TURNING

Once a reckless freelancer, **JOSH NORMAN** has seen Pro Bowl corner, a former theater student, still loves to ad



ALL THE

field is a stage for Panthers cornerback Josh Norman, who minored in dramatic arts at Coastal Carolina, readily recites Homer and has been known to quote *Gladiator* after pass breakups. ("What we do in life echoes in eternity!") Before facing the Seahawks on Sunday, though, Norman opted for originality: He galloped out of the tunnel, straddling a football like a saddle and shouting, "Giddy-up!" The performance was both literal (Norman, an avid horse rider, owns a chestnut saddlebred named Delta) and interpretive (he has tamed wild-stallion wideouts all season).

"We all knew what a character Josh is," says Carolina linebacker Thomas Davis. "Because of the year he's had, the world is seeing it too."

Norman has been a revelation for the Panthers, who'll play for the NFC title after jumping out to a 31-point lead against Seattle and then barely hanging on to win 31–24. The anchor on a secondary that's missing injured starters Bene Benwikere and Charles Tillman, he has held opposing QBs to a league-low 54.0 passer rating, according to Pro Football Focus. Perhaps that's why Russell Wilson didn't throw at Norman until the final five minutes of the first half.

It's fitting that in the same game that Richard Sherman and his Legion of Boom appeared to lose their superpowers, Norman continued his ascent as the next great supervillain of the secondary. His seasonlong audition as Sherman 2.0 has included brash declarations and petitions for respect—plus a growing list of nemeses. Norman's sparring instigated a head-butting



A CORNER

the light and—awww, who are we kidding? The Panthers' -lib. His next role: Cardinals killer? —by EMILY KAPLAN

meltdown by Giants wideout Odell Beckham Jr. in Week 14. A week later Falcons receiver Roddy White laughed off Norman as a lockdown corner, citing Carolina's propensity for zone coverages. In other words, Norman had his attention. "Josh is notorious for getting into opponents' heads," says Tillman. "It's like a Jedi mind trick."

When asked about facing the Cardinals' Larry Fitzgerald in the NFC title game, Norman played deferential: "The older you get, the finer the wine." (Let the mind tricks begin!)

A college walk-on who was drafted in the fifth round in 2012, Norman started as a rookie—but a tendency to freelance plays got him demoted to nickel corner in '13. When he continued to rely on instinct over assignment, he was benched for nine of the last 13 games that season.

"I realized that, to make it in the NFL, that's not the way you play," says Norman, who at 6 feet and 195 pounds isn't particularly physical or fast, which leaves him relying largely on his outstanding peripheral vision. As much as he has evolved (in part by following some life coaching from owner Jerry Richardson), Norman can't kick his improvising habit.

Late in the third quarter on Sunday, he hung shallow in zone coverage. As Wilson scrambled, Norman abandoned his post and charged, racking up the first sack of his career. "Sometimes you just go rogue for the heck of it," he says. "But I'm not looking forward to dissecting that play with Coach."

BLITZ AND PIECES

Norman's risky third-quarter takedown of Wilson (below) snuffed out a Seattle drive—and, really, any hope of an epic comeback.



THE CARDINALS CALL their slot receiver Old Man Larry, and while he's not a new addition to the roster, his story still speaks to the way Arizona operates. For his first nine NFL seasons, from 2004 through '12, Fitzgerald lined up mostly outside, as one of the best receivers in pro football. But when Arians arrived, he shifted Fitzgerald (who in '12 had suffered his worst full season, by almost every measure) into the slot, just as the coach had with Hines Ward in Pittsburgh and Reggie Wayne in Indianapolis. From the start, Fitzgerald struggled to adapt to his new position while fighting through leg injuries in each of the past two seasons. Palmer's abbreviated 2014 didn't help.

"I'm sure there are people in this building who thought I was washed up," says Fitzgerald. "But that doesn't matter. Because Bruce didn't."

After the Panthers ousted the Cardinals last January in the wild-card round, Arians met with the receiver in his office. He wanted Fitzgerald to play in the slot exclusively this season, telling him, "There are 90 balls inside for you, easy." Fitzgerald simply nodded in agreement.

Arians was wrong: His estimate was low. Playing almost exclusively inside—healthily, and alongside a fit Palmer—Old Man Larry found creases in defenses and exploited coverage over the middle. His blocking (never his strongest suit) improved to the point where Arians now calls him the best blocking receiver in pro football. Perhaps most important, though, has been his freeing up the outside for speedy young wideouts John Brown, Michael Floyd and J.J. Nelson, vaulting Palmer to career highs in touchdown passes (35), passing yards (4,671) and passer rating (104.6) while making the QB an MVP candidate. "Coach," Fitzgerald told Arians late this season, "you're a genius."

Arians's experiment with Old Man Larry echoes his deployment of Freeney, Johnson, Swearingen and Bryant. "I don't care how or when you got here, or where you played before," he says. "If you're one of the best 11 in a certain package, you'll work. I think we have 16 starters on both sides of the ball."

"I've been here 12 years," says Fitzgerald, "and the cupboard was never bare. We always had talent. But we didn't always have guys in the right positions. I've never seen the roster more aligned than this year."

What's the difference? "Steve and Bruce came in," he says. "That's huge. At this age, my window of opportunity is slim. I don't care how they do it, because everything I've worked for is right in front of me."

He means the Super Bowl, the trophy, the ring. Best-case scenario. □


SB 100

Sports Illustrated | WIRED

Crystal Ball

As part of an ongoing series from SI and Wired imagining the next 50 years of football, SI's experts predict how the NFL will change

INTERVIEW BY BEN BASKIN

 We assembled six of our finest football minds for a roundtable—senior writers Greg Bishop, Michael Rosenberg and Jenny Vrentas, staff writer Emily Kaplan, deputy managing editor L. Jon Wertheim and SI.com special projects editor Ben Eagle.

SI: Let's start with this: Who will be playing football in 2066?

L. Jon Wertheim: The demographics are going to shift. Think of it like boxing. The sport still exists, but the athletes come from a much narrower band of the population than they did a half century ago.

Michael Rosenberg: I don't think the public is quite as addicted to the violence as people think. The most popular players are quarterbacks—the guys who never hit anybody. But through some combination of safer equipment and rule changes, the game has to become safer, if not actually *safe*.

Emily Kaplan: Just as the league eyes international expansion, scouts will



AHEAD OF THE GAME

Our experts agree: Concerns about concussions and safety will prompt changes to the sport at all levels.

broaden their scope. I think we are not far off from seeing the NFL tapping into South America, Asia, Africa—every continent—for talent.

Ben Eagle: If you're a top athlete in 2066, why would you play football? Basketball and soccer are considerably safer and, at present, more lucrative.

Greg Bishop: I think some of this comes down to how soon they can get a test for CTE for the living. Then the question is, Would players take that test? Would they want to know if they had brain damage?

The more information they have, the more I think some of them—most?—will stop playing.

Jenny Vrentas: I think the physical attributes of football players 50 years down the line will depend on how the game evolves in terms of player safety. Rule changes may de-emphasize attributes like being able to plow through other players. In an unlikely, extreme case, we'd see the game morph into a seven-on-seven format that emphasizes skill and speed.
SI: Let's talk about the play on the field—I want predictions on weird little changes we may see.

Wertheim: Simply for the anachronistic value, I'd want to keep first-down chains and the coin toss. Innovations in media, technology, safety, etc., will be brought to bear. Official challenges will be re-

solved more quickly. And more pylon cams. Those are great.

Bishop: Players on the field will be able to see those yellow lines you see on TV, through holograms. The position of fullback will no longer exist. And reporters will be banned from the stadium, unless they work for Derek Jeter or for the team.

Rosenberg: I'm curious about the pace of the game. There is such a

clear strategic advantage to speeding it up, and one could argue that would make for a more entertaining product, but the two biggest issues facing the game now are probably player safety and officiating, and speeding up the game is a detriment to both.

Vrentas: I'd assume fans will be watching games as if they were on the field, via virtual reality. Concussions will be diagnosed on the sideline with the speed and reliability of a rapid strep test. And there will be no judgment calls about whether a player made a first down or crossed the goal line—there will be technology for that.

Eagle: By 2066 we'll ensure that every halftime show will feature a monkey riding a dog. □

SI.COM

You can see an expanded version of this roundtable and other articles exploring the future of football in our Super Bowl 100 series, presented by Gatorade and Microsoft Surface, at SI.com/sb100 and Wired.com/sb100

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NOV. 27: 7:46 P.M. The Capitals defeat Tampa Bay 4-2.



7:53 P.M. Leydig hauls Washington's heavy load.



9:42 P.M. After scoring the opening goal aga



NHL

RESTLESS LEGS

ON THE darkened tarmac at the empty airport, carrying their per diems and their passports, the Capitals hustled aboard Delta flight 8951, chartered service from Dulles International to Toronto Pearson. A construction trailer doubled as a security checkpoint, where all 22 players, six coaches, three equipment managers, two trainers, a massage therapist, one general manager, one hockey operations analyst and one director of team services were verified on the manifest. A conveyer belt fed 2,770 pounds of equipment into the plane's belly. Aboard the Boeing 737 flight attendants prepared meals of strip steak and salmon salad. The team chef went heavy on protein for a reason. After Washington beat Tampa Bay 4-2 at home on Nov. 27, only 21 hours and 18 minutes separated the Caps from a meeting with the Maple Leafs across the border. They needed to refuel. Fast.

A voice crackled over the speakers. *Stand by for all-call.*

From his standard window seat in the second row, head coach Barry Trotz checked his watch. It was 9:42 p.m., an unusually early departure time for a back-to-back, but after a 5 p.m. start against the Lightning, his team gladly welcomed the extra hours of cushion. Besides, this post-Thanksgiving twin bill already seemed like a logistical cinch. The drive to the airport had never been

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*TWO GAMES, TWO CITIES,
29 HOURS: NOTHING IS AS
DEMANDING AS AN NHL
BACK-TO-BACK SWING. THE
LEAGUE'S TOP TEAM INVITED
SI BEHIND THE SCENES AS IT
WENT THROUGH THE GRIND*

BY ALEX PREWITT

Photographs by
Simon Bruty for
Sports Illustrated

inst the Lightning, Ovechkin unwinds with teammates over a game of 7 Up, 7 Down.



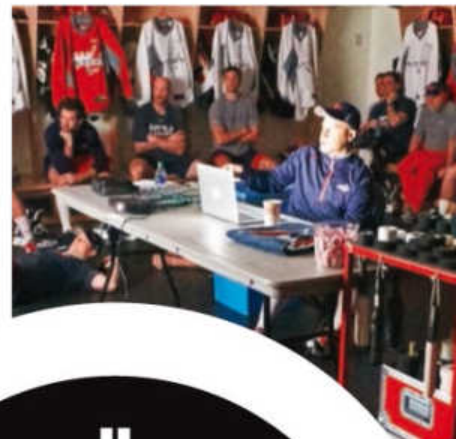
10:30 P.M. Touch down in Toronto.



NOV. 28: 7:49 A.M. Myles sharpens skates.



11:01 A.M. Trotz presents his pregame report.



faster. The forecast predicted no bad weather. The itinerary showed a midnight arrival at the Ritz-Carlton on Wellington Street West, one of the poshest hotels in the league. "This is the miracle trip," Trotz said, picking at his salmon salad. He also knew not to be fooled into complacency. This was the fifth of the Capitals' 13 back-to-backs this season. The whole traveling party understood how chaotic these swings could be.

An hour earlier, as the players left the ice at the Verizon Center, the home locker room had turned into a jungle. Only when a road game beckoned the next day would postgame at home be so hurried. Equipment bags were wheeled out the back exit and stuffed into a box truck. Down the hall the coaches rushed through a postgame film-review session before heading to the airport. Players scrambled to shower and kiss their loved ones goodbye, scarfing down food and knotting their ties on the walk to the garage. And now they were here, climbing to 20,000 feet.

To guard against fatigue, the trainers distributed dissolvable tablets of magnesium, which can improve brain function, and packs of powdered Pedialyte to replenish electrolytes. In first class assistant coach Blaine Forsythe worked on the even-strength report he would deliver to the team the next morning. "People just see us play the game here Friday, then they see us on TV Saturday night," Forsythe says. "They don't understand the hours of prep that go into it." Near the back of the plane forward T.J. Oshie switched on an electric stimulation device, an Accelerated Recovery Performance (ARP) machine, and relaxed while playing cards. Across the aisle Brooks Laich downloaded his shifts against Tampa Bay from the team's external hard drive and began watching as the cabin lights dimmed.

This season NHL teams will play a combined 412 back-to-back sets—two games, held on consecutive days. All but 25 of these schedule land mines will require travel between games: road-road, road-home or, as with this late-November grind for which the Capitals gave SI exclusive, behind-the-scenes access, home-road. Across such a long season the regular rhythm of NHL life invariably meets disruptions. Aching muscles. Swelling bruises. Engine malfunctions. Blown tires. Stiff mattresses. Or, as the Capitals found last February while snoozing between an otherwise stress-free afternoon-afternoon swing, a screeching hotel fire alarm in downtown Philadelphia. On an ordinary trip these issues can be easily shrugged aside, but back-to-backs offer no buffer.

Yes, NBA teams average more back-to-backs (17.8 per team, compared with 13.7 in the NHL this season) while also squeezing 82 games into six months, and MLB teams play almost eight games

**"IT ALMOST SEEMS
LIKE A CONTINUATION
OF THE GAME BEFORE,"
LAICH SAYS. "FROM
THE THIRD TO PLAYING
A FOURTH, FIFTH AND
SIXTH PERIOD."**

for every one day off. But factor in the bruising demands of hockey, a league footprint that stretches from Vancouver to south Florida and the frequency with which things like border customs and snowstorms can present delays, it can be reasonably argued that NHL back-to-backs are the toughest of any sport. "It almost seems like a continuation of the game before," Laich says. "From the third period almost to playing a fourth, fifth and sixth period. You stay in game mode, and they roll one into the other."

After a smooth 47-minute ride, the plane dipped below the clouds and onto the runway. Two buses carried the team to its hotel in downtown Toronto. Left behind were six men dressed in polo shirts with Capitals logos, staring into the glow of the cargo hold, their night nowhere near over.

THE CAPITALS checked into their rooms and settled into their plush beds, but a few blocks away the hallways of the Air Canada Centre were humming. Trunks flew from the loading dock into the visiting locker room, a reverse of the process that had occurred at the Verizon Center four hours earlier. The clock above the door read 11:25 p.m.

12:11 P.M. After morning meetings the players return to the hotel for a meal and a nap.



Among the six Capitals support staffers working this late, only the three equipment managers were fulfilling their actual job descriptions. The others, two athletic trainers and a massage therapist, assisted for reasons head trainer Greg Smith explained like this: “We’re the team within the team.”

The quicker they worked, the sooner they slept, so no one turned down jobs. Smith lined up shower sandals in the coaches’ room. One door over the massage therapist, Robert Brown, hung laundry bags for the players in the dressing room. In the entryway assistant trainer Ben Reisz arranged sticks in numerical order—there were 113 on the rack, plus a 114th, used exclusively as a guideline for star winger Alex Ovechkin’s sticks and labeled MEASURE STICK DON’T TOUCH MOTHER-----!” Each stall was organized just like the next: Helmets on the top shelf, jersey hooks angled to the left, numbers facing out. Every detail felt important. The less the players’ routines were interrupted, the more they could focus on hockey.

Like Trotz, the support staffers loved the Miracle Trip for its early start. It sure beat the home-road swing to Florida on Halloween, during which they finally fell asleep around 5:30 a.m. Or the time they

6:35 P.M. Holtby leads the team out for warmups.



waited in the truck for Rascal Flatts to finish their set. Or when they were stopped from unloading at Madison Square Garden because the circus was in town. In 2001 the Capitals’ crew encountered a thick-chested bouncer blocking the entrance to the locker room at the Air Canada Centre, refusing to budge during a Britney Spears show. Some back and forth ensued until, from around the corner emerged Spears’s then boyfriend. Noticing the logos on the gear, Justin Timberlake told the bouncer, “These guys are all right.”

Alternatively, as one team official put it, they are “the heroes on the road.” It

is for this reason that four players wrote three-digit numbers on the whiteboard before warmups against Toronto, then tipped the equipment managers that amount after the Capitals won 4–2. It was a gesture of thanks to those who finally left the ACC a minute shy of 1 a.m.

THE NEXT morning, as the sun rose over the CN Tower and the players awoke at the hotel, Trotz and his staff walked to the rink for their morning meeting. Taking their seats inside the windowless coaches’ room, they opened their MacBooks and pecked away at their scouting assignments, each breaking down a different aspect of the Leafs. A portable printer spit out reports on face-offs and scoring chances. The television displayed the Capitals’ video software program, a dizzying cluster of clips—largely from Toronto’s three most recent games—each tagged with any combination of 61 possible labels, like FORECHECK and FIGHT! From the database they built a presentation to bring a game plan to life.

Even more than physical wear and tear, Trotz believes mental burnout poses the biggest threat to players during back-to-backs, so his assistants are constantly mindful of the line between sufficient preparation and information overload. Back-to-backs can test coaches this way. At once, the tight schedule narrows the window of preparation and places greater importance on what they do share. “You don’t want them leaving the meeting going, ‘Jesus, I don’t even know what to think about,’” Forsythe says. As winger Jay Beagle adds, “There’s such a thing as too much.”

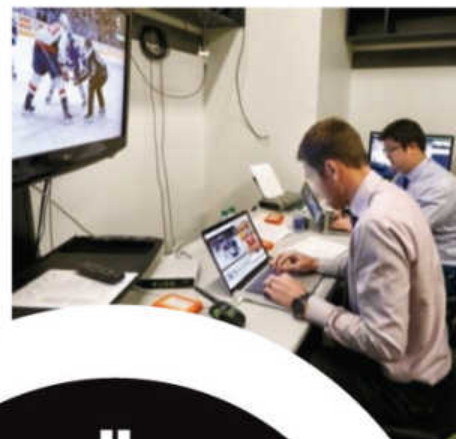
7:09 P.M. The Caps prepare to take the ice.



7:48 P.M. Washington triumphs over Toronto.



9:27 P.M. Video coaches analyze the game in real time.



To avoid this pitfall, the coaches organized the footage in the same manner as always—face-offs first, offensive zone last—so the players knew what was coming next. They featured segments that showed the Capitals executing well, to promote confidence, and pared it all down to two clips per topic. “One of what [the opponents] do, one of how we beat it,” Forsythe says. Two hours before the players arrive, the staff reviewed the presentation together. They included a clip of Toronto’s quick transition game and one of Ovechkin’s smart read on a power-play breakout. Throughout the day assistants grabbed players for brief, two-minute refresher courses—anything to interrupt the monotony of long meetings about systems.

“It’s a different way of learning, a different way of teaching,” Forsythe says. “But it’s also a way to get your information across without boring them to death with the same bull----.”

Another way? Bringing a former special operations agent to address the team about mental strength and overcoming fatigue, as Trotz did before the regular season began. Last season Washington struggled with slow starts in the second game of back-to-backs, often falling behind early and going 7-8-1 overall. “This is an area I want to see improved,” Trotz told him: “S--- happens,” Trotz says. “How do you deal with the s---?”

With a 6-1-1 record in back ends this season, the Caps have gotten better. And with the best record in hockey, 34-8-3 through Sunday, they see no reason to change their approach. Six whiteboards packed with notes on Toronto’s power play, penalty kill and even-strength systems awaited Washington’s players upon their arrival. A projector screen glowed with the team motto, *STICK TO THE SCRIPT*. As everyone squeezed into their stalls, the penalty-kill presentation, led by assistant Lane Lambert, began at 10:45, followed by Forsythe’s five-on-five talk at 10:52. Showing the footage the coaches had just dissected, he zipped through 42 clips in 10 minutes.

When Forsythe finished, Trotz stood up. “We talk about back-to-backs, we talk about mental toughness,” he told the players. “You’ve got to make sure your minds are right, your bodies are right to play a fast, f----- hard game.”

LIKE MANY coaches, Trotz never holds mandatory morning skates during back-to-backs, skipping the staple of the usual NHL game-day schedule to preserve energy. So players scattered when the meetings ended, seven hours before the puck dropped in Toronto. Laich hit the ice, looking for a few touches to keep his hands fresh. In the trainers’ room a Class 4 laser hovered over defenseman John Carlson’s left thigh, therapy for a purple bruise brought on by a

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AFTER MAKING
32 SAVES, HOLTBY HAD
DOWNED 17 LITERS
OF FLUID. THE AVERAGE
ADULT’S DAILY
RECOMMENDATION
CALLS FOR THREE.

blocked shot days ago. Oshie, with cords dangling by his sides, watched film on a laptop while his ARP machine helped circulate blood around four muscle groups. “Earlier in my career, I wasn’t really doing anything. I was just playing on energy and youthful excitement,” says the 29-year-old. “This is the next step for me.” A few players worked up a sweat by lifting weights. Others made time for a lengthy stretch. Down the hall, a queue formed for time on Brown’s massage table. In this, his first season with the team, Brown knew to expect more work during back-to-backs than on normal game days.

It was a drastically different scene from what their bosses remembered about NHL travel and training several decades ago—commercial flights the morning of the second game, rookies stuffed into middle seats. Sure, security was more relaxed, but “it’s not like they have meals for you after each game,” says GM Brian MacLellan, a former NHL winger who played with five teams during the 1980s and early ’90s.

Out in the narrow hallway Beagle pedaled a stationary bike and slugged from a bottle of coconut water. Among the more health-conscious Capitals, he laughed when recalling what passed for postgame recovery in the minor leagues, where two-in-twos

ime.

9:41 P.M. Trotz congratulates his players after a 4-2 win.



NOV. 29: 1:21 A.M. The Caps return home.



and even three-in-threes are commonplace. “You ate what you could just to get something in your body,” he says. “Everyone puts money in a cup, orders food from one place.” Among the healthiest items were chicken Parmesan and Philly cheesesteaks.

Those issues are nonexistent in what Beagle calls “the Never Hungry League.” Between the final horn against Tampa Bay and takeoff to Toronto, he had already downed a protein shake heavy with glutamine, spent five minutes on the bike, bathed for six more in a cold tub and ate two full meals, both prepared by the team chef and approved by an in-house “nutritional task force.” At breakfast defenseman Nate Schmidt took a vitamin supplement and remembered to eat a pear; a team-issued blood test had revealed he needed more vitamin B-12 and C in his diet. Everyone had their routines—Ovechkin, the goal-scoring cyborg, fueled himself with at least three cans of Coca-Cola by game time—but whether the methods worked often depended on how the first night went. “Sometimes I feel better,” Beagle says, “and sometimes it’s a struggle on back-to-backs.”

For no one was this more true than goaltender Braden Holtby, a workhorse—through Sunday he had played in 37 of the Capitals’ 45 games—who also has a history of cramping. Last season Holtby led the league with 73 appearances, eight of which occurred on zero days’ rest. Though statistical wisdom suggested tapping a fresh backup is more prudent (this season goalies who started both games are 30-27-11 on the second day), Holtby prided himself on maintaining an almost meditative focus in the crease that protected him from mental stress during back-to-backs.

But he also sheds around nine pounds of sweat per game. “Hydration’s the hardest part,” he says. So

after learning on the flight that he would face Toronto too, he launched his recovery program into overdrive. He sipped saltwater throughout the afternoon and guzzled six small bottles of a pink electrolyte concoction upon coming to the rink for warmups. By the end of the night, after he made 32 saves and the Capitals completed their third back-to-back sweep of the season, Holtby had downed 17 liters of fluid. The average adult’s daily recommendation calls for three.

THE CAPITALS lurched through the first period against Toronto, outshot 16–4. A particularly lethargic start, it was reminiscent of their struggles last season. Still, one of their four shots—a wrister from Jason Chimera on a two-on-one break—hit the net, and they entered intermission tied. Two unanswered power-play goals in the second boosted Washington to a 4–2 win, the team’s fifth straight. And though they had just played 120 minutes of hockey in 29 hours, the Capitals came off the ice full of energy.

But by 9:58 p.m. the visitors’ dressing room was a ghost town. All 2,770 pounds of baggage had been loaded back onto the equipment truck, which rolled out at 10:51, followed by the two team buses. Since returning Stateside meant going through commercial customs, a hassle with such a large party, the sign outside their gate at Toronto Pearson read, DELAYED. Under different circumstances this might have mattered. But the Capitals had an off-day scheduled for the next morning. Taking off just after midnight was no big deal for the players.

As flight attendants passed around roasted chicken and broccoli, equipment managers Brock Myles and Craig Leydig quickly fell asleep, taking advantage of a few minutes without responsibilities. That night they would not clock out until 3 a.m., leaving the practice facility only after the bags had been unpacked, the laundry shoved into the industrial washer and the stalls arranged and doused in antiodor spray.

Upon landing at Dulles, the players hopped into their cars and drove home. But below the plane Myles and Leydig, for the fourth time in 29 hours, began yanking bags off the conveyor belt. A light drizzle patted the ground. They looked tired. “Back-to-back,” Myles said, explanation enough. □

44.2

Win percentage, in games ending in regulation, of teams on the second night of back-to-backs this season.

10.4

Percent decrease in shots for Washington, the NHL’s best team, between the first and second game of back-to-back sets.

46.3

Percent of back-to-back sets that have seen at least one game go to OT.

A close-up, artistic photograph of a person's face, partially obscured by blue face paint. The paint is applied in thick, expressive strokes, covering the forehead, cheeks, and chin. The person's eyes are visible, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark, making the face and the white text stand out.

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Sports Illustrated

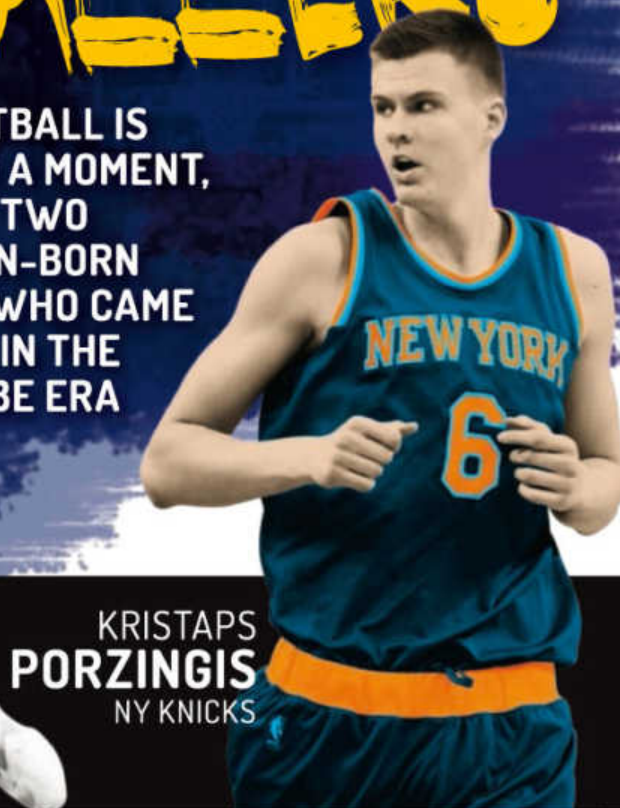
D I G I T A L N E T W O R K

SI • SI KIDS • SI PLAY • FANSIDED • 120 SPORTS • GOLF

GLOBALLERS



**BEN
SIMMONS**
LSU TIGERS



**KRISTAPS
PORZINGIS**
NY KNICKS



THERE IS no masochism, this season, in committing an inordinate amount of time to watching a 21-22 NBA team that's unlikely to make the playoffs and an 11-6 college team that is in danger of not making the NCAA tournament. It is instead an expression of hope—that Knicks forward Kristaps Porzingis, the No. 4 pick in the 2015 NBA draft, is the beginning of a revival at Madison Square Garden, and that LSU freshman Ben Simmons, 2016's projected No. 1 pick, is the ultimate prize for a season's worth of tanking. It is also a chance to marvel—at a 7' 3", 20-year-old Latvian with effortless shooting range to 25 feet, and a 6' 10", 19-year-old Australian who can make plays like a point guard. Porzingis and Simmons are gems of this golden age of globalization. They are big men from far-flung beach towns who look like no player before them, and thus look like the future.

This time last year Porzingis was playing in Seville, Spain, having migrated from the town of Liepāja at age 15. The extent of his Stateside exposure before the draft was in a group workout on June 12

in Las Vegas. Knicks fans were asked to accept on faith that he was legit; many did not, and thus the bar for Porzingis's debut was set at "skeptical." But by averaging 14.0 points and generating endless YouTube highlights, Porzingis has become the NBA's most buzzworthy rookie—a position Simmons is widely expected to hold next season.

Simmons is the antithesis of a mystery prospect. He left Melbourne for the U.S. at 16 and was the No. 1-ranked player in his high school class. Magic Johnson, the most famous oversized playmaker of all time, added fuel to the hype train on Jan. 5 when he tweeted, "LSU's Ben Simmons is the best all around player I've seen since LeBron James came out of high school straight to the NBA!" With praise like that, backlash is inevitable, so there are questions about Simmons's jump shot and his inability to single-handedly keep the Tigers in the Top 25.

Both Simmons and Porzingis have the luxury of unnatural grace, athleticism and versatility for players of their size. Only one of them has the luxury of low expectations.

—Luke Winn



GLOBALERS

ZINGER!

TO ALL THE HATERS WHO BOOED ON DRAFT NIGHT: THE JOKE'S ON YOU. KRISTAPS PORZINGIS HAS SET NEW YORK ABLAZE—AND THIS HUGE PHENOM HAS STAYING POWER

BY LEE JENKINS



LOOKING UP

Thanks in part to the 7' 3" Latvian, the Knicks have surpassed last season's win total and have improved their offensive rating from 29th in the league to 11th.

Photograph by **Greg Nelson**
For Sports Illustrated

"HE'S SO TALL!" SAID HUBIE BROWN, AN NBA FIXTURE REDUCED TO AN AWESTRUCK KID.

KRISTAPS PORZINGIS sits in stages, folding his 7' 3" frame into a leather chair, collapsing his legs under a coffee table, squeezing his elbows inside an arm rest. It is an act of contortion almost as acrobatic as a lefthanded floater in a crowded lane. The NBA is populated by outsized humans, but there is something especially supernatural about the length of Porzingis, which can't simply be characterized by wingspan measurements at predraft workouts. The first words Hubie Brown said upon meeting the Knicks' rookie were, "He's so tall!" Here was a Hall of Fame coach and broadcaster, a fixture in professional basketball for four decades, reduced to an awestruck kid on the street. "He looks bigger than 7' 3"," adds Hawks point guard Jeff Teague, evidence of a phenomenon that has already grown larger than life.

When the gymnastics are finished and Porzingis is finally seated, he surveys his opulent surroundings in the lobby of the Atlanta Ritz-Carlton: the marble floors, the crystal chandeliers, the velvet banquettes, the man playing the black baby grand piano, the woman serving the complimentary chicken sliders. He just arrived from New York, where he splits time between high-rise apartments in White Plains and Manhattan, ferried to and from residences in a new Mercedes sedan. Seven months shy of his 21st birthday, he chooses steakhouses over nightclubs, and reports he has acquired a taste for filet mignon. He sleeps on a customized 98-by-80-inch mattress made by one sponsor, sips from a sports drink brewed by another and takes to Instagram to thank a brand ambassador for his biker-denim jeans. When the Knicks travel, they fly on a charter, and the carrier happens to sponsor him as well.

Such are the benefits enjoyed by a tip-dunking, floor-spacing, shot-swatting genetic marvel in America's hungriest hoops metropolis. The best rookie south of Minneapolis, Porzingis is putting up 13.9 points, 7.9 rebounds and 1.9 blocks, so accurate that he commands attention to 25 feet and so stretchy that he can snatch boards when he appears marooned on the elbow. Porzingis savors all his newfound luxuries, perhaps more than your standard lottery pick, because he remembers so

clearly the last time he was a rookie. He was a 15-year-old from Liepāja, Latvia, dropped off at a dingy dorm in Seville to play in Spain's ACB League. He lived with two Baloncesto Sevilla teammates, and they only spoke Spanish, which he did not. He was already 6' 8", and when he jumped into his twin bed, it always seemed to break. Since his room didn't have air-conditioning, he would drag the mattress into a suite that did, then sleep on the floor alongside seven others.

Porzingis weighed less than 160 pounds and needed nourishment, but the Spanish food served at the dorm didn't usually agree with him. He earned about \$500 a month, and saw plenty of restaurants nearby, but he couldn't stand to part with his spending money. He developed anemia, and by the time he finished the 20-minute walk to the gym every morning for practice he was exhausted. He missed shots he typically made and wondered

if his size was hindering his coordination. *My hands are too big*, he convinced himself. He tweaked his mechanics and his release until his body and brain were fried. He collapsed at night on the little mattress and stared at the ceiling. *How can I get out of this contract?*

He went home to Latvia for the holidays, packing dirty laundry because he could never really get his clothes clean. When he returned to Spain, he caught a whiff of his mom's detergent as he unpacked. The scent, fresh and familiar, nearly wrecked him. *I don't want to be here anymore, I want to go back*. He missed the Baltic Sea, a 10-minute walk from his parents' house, and Frisbee on the beach with friends.

There are a lot of reasons Porzingis stayed in Seville and why, five years later, he inspires chants at Madison Square Garden, rap anthems in Eastern Europe and jersey shortages at the NBA Store. He learned enough Spanish that





working in a metal factory for one stint and managing the BK Liepāja basketball club for another. But the Russian financial crisis of 1998 left many across the Eastern bloc unemployed, including Tālis. “Those were very hard times for our family and a lot of other families,” Jānis says. “But then you see the light: Maybe I can play basketball, and make something of myself, and help out.”

A 6' 7" sniper, Jānis spent 12 seasons in Europe, bouncing around from the Baltics to Belgium. Tālis eventually landed a job as a bus driver, waking up

at 1 a.m. to start his shift, and Jānis sent checks home when he could. “We shared everything we had,” he says. Jānis returned to his parents’ two-story house every summer and shot in the backyard with his brothers, Mārtins and Kristaps, on a wooden slab reclaimed from a local gym that burned down.

THE SKINNY

A 240-pound Euro with a sweet stroke, Porzingis has battled—successfully—the presumption that he’s soft.

Kristaps, the baby of the family, started playing in first grade for Edvins Sprude, who once coached Ingrida. Sprude could be brutal. “He made me cry,” Kristaps recalls. “But I loved it.” Sprude put Kristaps at point guard, and the oversized floor general polished his handle on the cracked wood out back. Mārtins threw elbows at him, impersonating Kaspars Kam-bala, the Latvian basketball player-boxer who treated the floor as a ring at UNLV. Kristaps loved that, too. By the time Kristaps turned 11, Jānis joked about becoming his agent and enrolled him in after-school English classes. “Why am I doing this?” Kristaps moaned. Jānis, then 24, explained that he’d someday have to bond with Americans.

Kristaps mastered the language and marinated in the culture. His favorite musician was Drake. His favorite movie was *Friday*. He begged Jānis for Air Jordans. He cheered for the Lakers, partly because of Pau Gasol, but more so Kobe Bryant. He braided his blond locks into cornrows, inspired by Allen Iverson and Carmelo Anthony, and he watched videos of Kevin Garnett and LaMarcus Aldridge. He discovered new heroes, but Jānis still came first. Kristaps reminisces about his dad, sitting alone in the parked minivan, beaming at Jānis’s tapes on the overhead TV.

In the fall of 2013, Jānis was playing for GKK Sibenik in Croatia when he slipped during practice on an advertising sticker at the top of the key. His hip was broken. The doctor who performed the surgery told him there was a 50% chance he could return at full strength. “I still wanted to play,” Jānis says.

his teammates respected his effort if not his diction. A nutritionist diagnosed his anemia and dispensed vitamins to treat it. He lost himself in basketball games, YouTube videos and bullfights. But there is another reason he did not rush back to the Baltic.

He couldn’t fail Jānis.

JĀNIS WAS the first of three sons born to Tālis and Ingrida Porzingis. Tālis, 6' 4", was an undersized power forward who played professionally in the Soviet Union. Ingrida, 6' 1", starred for Latvian youth national teams. After Tālis retired, he held a variety of jobs,

"I was 31. I felt better than ever. But I don't believe things happen just because. I believe they happen for a reason."

Jānis again considered what was best for the family. His time was coming to an end. His brother's was just beginning. Jānis retired and headed to Spain, where Kristaps was no homesick wallflower anymore. He was the 7-foot sensation who attracted legendary Spanish coach Aíto García Reneses to Seville, followed in '14 by decorated NBA assistant Scott Roth. Reneses and Roth had both tutored Gasol early in his career and wondered if they were seeing the next incarnation, minus the opera outings and medical-school ambitions. "Kris does read," Mārtins says, "but mostly audiobooks."

When Porzingis details how he survived the early years in Spain, he describes an old laptop that became a loyal companion. He lived on the YouTube channel Dawk Ins, which collected NBA highlights. He'd watch Kevin Durant one day and ask his coaches, "Am I like him?" Then he'd watch Anthony Davis the next and ask the same question. He bookmarked Bryant highlights ("The Kobe Clinic will get you so hyped") and slam-dunk compilations ("They make me try to dunk so hard"). At 3 a.m. on the road, as his teammates relaxed with movies or video games, he cued up the Clippers and imagined himself on the other end of Chris Paul lobbs.

Kristaps deconstructed his own skills with his father, over Skype or FaceTime, the way Jānis once did. "My dad gave me a thousand pieces of advice," Kristaps says. "Nine-hundred-ninety-nine about basketball and one about life. But that's O.K." He did not revolt when Jānis put him through 2½-hour shooting sessions and then made him study NBA press conferences. He had to prepare for everything.

Kristaps was too young to remember the Russian crisis, but he heard the stories. He understood how Jānis gave the family a boost when it needed one, and how his opportunity was approaching. "I wanted to do what my brother did," Kristaps says. "But he never had a chance to be a great NBA player. He was close, but he never got there. I wanted to finish it."

MANY OF the scouts and executives who descended on Spain last winter were scared. "They asked so many questions," Roth recalls. "How tough is he? How long will he need to develop? Does he really love the game?" Since 1998, 18 Europeans had been picked in the lottery, with only Gasol and Dirk Nowitzki making an All-Star team. The busts, like Darko Milicic and Nikoloz Tskitishvili, produced a common Euro stereo-



30

Years since a Knicks rookie has exceeded Porzingis's scoring (13.9) or rebounding (7.9) average. Patrick Ewing topped both of Zinger's marks in 1985-86.

42

Three-pointers made by Porzingis through Sunday. The only player his height to make more in a season is Hall of Famer Arvydas Sabonis, who made 49 with the Trail Blazers in 1996-97.

248,783

All-Star votes received by Porzingis at week's end. That placed him seventh in the East frontcourt race and easily made him the NBA's top rookie vote-getter.

type: tall but soft, skilled but aloof. "That cliché hung high over Kris's head," says Larry Sanders, Sevilla's former trainer.

Roth tried to combat it, underlining the fortitude necessary to endure Spain's junior divisions. "Crappy apartments, crappy gyms, bad balls, bad rims, maybe a jersey, maybe not," he says. "If you're good, you go on. If you're not, you go away." As recently as last season Porzingis often came off the bench, averaging a pedestrian 11.0 points and 4.6 rebounds in front of crowds that rarely exceeded 2,000.

But opponents, who read mock drafts, saw a natural target. Zinger, as he was called, had alabaster limbs that looked slender enough to snap. "You'd have these 35-year-old men trying to beat the hell out of him," Roth says, as if describing an army of Kambalas. "Pushing him, bodying him, really knocking him around, and no one called anything."

The abuse didn't sap his spirit. Porzingis relished the hyperspeed practices Roth brought from the

**KEY FACTOR**

Porzingis's length comes in handy at both ends: The Knicks have allowed the NBA's second-fewest points in the paint.

give up. I'm not that guy. That's the way my parents raised us. That's the way we are." Byars eyed him in the weight room. "This is just an example, but lifting in Europe is not a priority the way it is in America," Byars says. "Most guys don't want to do it. Kris lifted every off day."

Sevilla was a mess last season. The owner ran out of money, players went unpaid and Roth couldn't obtain a

coaching license, relegating him to a glorified team manager. "I couldn't stand up, I couldn't call timeout, I couldn't address the referees or the official scorers," Roth recounts. "It was a disaster."

Porzingis injected levity into misery, putting his gift of assimilation on display with hilarious impersonations of teammates from all backgrounds. Unlike the stiff image of the 7-foot foreigner, unintentionally funny, Zinger's humor is genuine. "Tall people problems," he cracks as he ducks into a crowded elevator, disarming wide-eyed strangers.

"People are just drawn to him," says Tim Shea. "It's his charisma, his happiness, his *alegria*." Shea was the Knicks' European scout when they used the No. 15 pick to take 7' 2" French center Frédéric Weis in 1999. Shea still remembers the tears in Weis's eyes when he left the Boston Summer League and headed home, never to play a regular-season NBA game. Shea, a native New Yorker, absorbed endless barbs from his buddies back in Rockaway Beach. Of course he was not the one who selected Weis, but he blamed himself for going along with the pick. "I'm responsible," he says, "because I didn't fight hard enough." Shea is currently out of the league, but he lives in Spain and monitored Porzingis in case anybody wanted his input.

Two days before last June's draft, Shea fired off a tweet urging the organization to snag Porzingis with the fourth pick. "It wasn't my job, and I know it was a little bit off the wall," Shea says. "But I took a lot of s--- because of Frédéric, and I wanted to make sure if I recommended another player to the Knicks I'd have the right perspective."

Shea's old employer didn't need the tip. Clarence Gaines, a top adviser to Knicks president Phil Jackson, had already been to Seville. "He sent an email to me and Phil that read, 'Whoever gets the first pick has to consider Kristaps at No. 1,'" Knicks general manager Steve Mills says. The front office was not sold, not yet. "We liked him," Mills says, "but there was a concern about whether he'd be able to withstand the pressures of this market. Then we met him."

T IS the first week of January and the Knicks have matched their win total from last season. But in the visiting locker room at Atlanta's Philips Arena, they sound less interested in their 17th victory than their rookie's first technical foul. Porzingis did not do anything egregious, grabbing a loose ball at the same time as Kent Bazemore and staring down the Hawks' wing when Bazemore ripped it away after the whistle. How the Knicks responded to the exchange was far more revealing than Porzingis's role in it. Anthony rushed in to confront Bazemore. Center Robin Lopez followed, jawing and gesturing. Players were sent to their respective benches. The Knicks overreacted, which in this rare case may have been the most appropriate reaction of all.

Porzingis was booed at Barclays Center on draft night. Anthony issued a cryptic tweet the next day amid reports that he was unhappy with the selection. Players showed up for summer pickup games at the practice facility expecting another Darko. "I tested him, the way I would anyone," forward Lance Thomas says. "Body him up, get in him, foul him hard, make him uncomfortable. I wanted to see if the toughness was there. I wanted to see what he does when adversity hits."

So it goes for Porzingis, and every other Euro, subjected to one macho referendum after another. The Russian crisis, the Seville dorms, the Spanish brutes—none of that was enough. He had to prove his manhood again, here. "Nothing fazed him," Thomas recalls. "I'd score on him, talk some s---, and then he'd come down and ask for the ball back. He won me over right there. I think he won Melo over as well."

One summer day Anthony and Porzingis worked out together, then sat on the basket stanchion and talked. "Can you show me that move you just did?"

NBA. He learned the bank shot from assistant coach and former Trail Blazers center Audie Norris. He implemented the Dream Shake. Sanders once mentioned that when Michael Jordan posted up a defender, he felt his man with his legs instead of his back. "It was a really small thing," Sanders says, "but I noticed Kris doing it the next game."

Coaches shared those nuggets with scouts, but teams dug deeper. "They talked to me too," adds former Sevilla wing Derrick Byars, who roomed with Porzingis on the road. "They asked, 'What are we missing here? Where are the red flags?'"

Byars, who starred at Vanderbilt and spent most of the past decade overseas, had never encountered a young European more in tune with the American experience than Porzingis. It wasn't just that he listened to Meek Mill, loved Rihanna and comprehended the nuances of the bro hug. He was bred to believe that basketball could be lifeblood. "I can't back down," Porzingis says. "I can't

"I'M RIDING WITH YOU FROM NOW ON," ANTHONY SAID AFTER FINDING OUT ZINGER ONCE HAD CORNROWS.

KRISTAPS
PORZINGIS

Porzingis asked. Anthony was impressed. In the fall Anthony and Porzingis chatted again, and Porzingis told him about the cornrows. "After that I was like, 'All right, O.K., I'm riding with you from now on,'" Anthony laughs. "The kid has an aura about him."

Anthony is enjoying one of his most productive seasons, though not by his usual metrics. His points are down, but so are his shots, and he's matching a career high for assists. Like Bryant and Gasol, Anthony and Porzingis have developed an intercontinental connection, fostered by the triangle offense and the Zen backdrop. At the Rookie Transition Program every attendee was instructed to grab a book from one of three stacks. Porzingis was interested in a Bill Russell biography, but only two copies remained of Jackson's *Eleven Rings*. "I better take this one, quick," Porzingis told himself. He liked what he read.

"Phil has installed a culture here that makes people feel challenged but comfortable," Mills says. "If there's a mistake, you keep playing, and you don't focus on what you do wrong. That kind of environment has helped Kristaps, but it's helped everybody." The Knicks, demonstrating their newfound *alegria*, are the most improved team in the NBA.

Success in New York is fraught with peril, but Porzingis's life remains simple, despite the endorsement deals and brand ambassadors. His primary residence is a three-bedroom apartment which he shares with his parents and brothers in White Plains, 30 miles north of the city near the Knicks' practice facility. Jānis, as promised, is his agent. Mārtins manages his schedule. Tālis watches League Pass, while learning English, and Ingrida shushes him for nitpicking their son's post game. "All day, he's in the same position on the couch," Kristaps says, miming cheek in hand.

Porzingis stays at the facility from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., or until someone tells him to leave. He



was overjoyed when the Knicks gave him his own key to the gym, but coaches prefer he doesn't use it much, preserving his legs for an unexpected playoff chase. At night he still disappears down YouTube rabbit holes, unearthing new motivational clips or roundball classics. He notes that he can study himself these days, too. "He's lived poorly and now he lives well," Jānis says. "But he knows why he's here. He's here to work. He's not here to party. He does not associate himself with anything but basketball. When you talk about something else, he doesn't even see it. He knows who he is. He is pure basketball. It's beautiful."

Jānis watches him warming up for a game in Miami. On the other end of the court is Amar'e Stoudemire, a little-used Heat reserve, averaging 3.2 points. Four years ago Stoudemire was the prince of New York, and then it was Jeremy Lin. In the big city, forever seeking a savior, it is hard to separate the fads from the goods. But this craze is built to last. There is nothing insane about it.

Porzingis can handle the ball, as Edvins Sprude intended, and he can protect the rim, as half the Rockets discovered. Zinger blocked seven shots against Houston, seven against Minnesota, six against Orlando, five against Milwaukee. But those weren't even his best performances. He went for 28 points and 11 rebounds against the Spurs, 23 and 13 against the Cavaliers, 29 and 11 against the Hornets. Porzingis thrives in the open spaces of the new NBA, and if Timberwolves center Karl-Anthony Towns does not capture Rookie of the Year, he will be waiting for the putback.

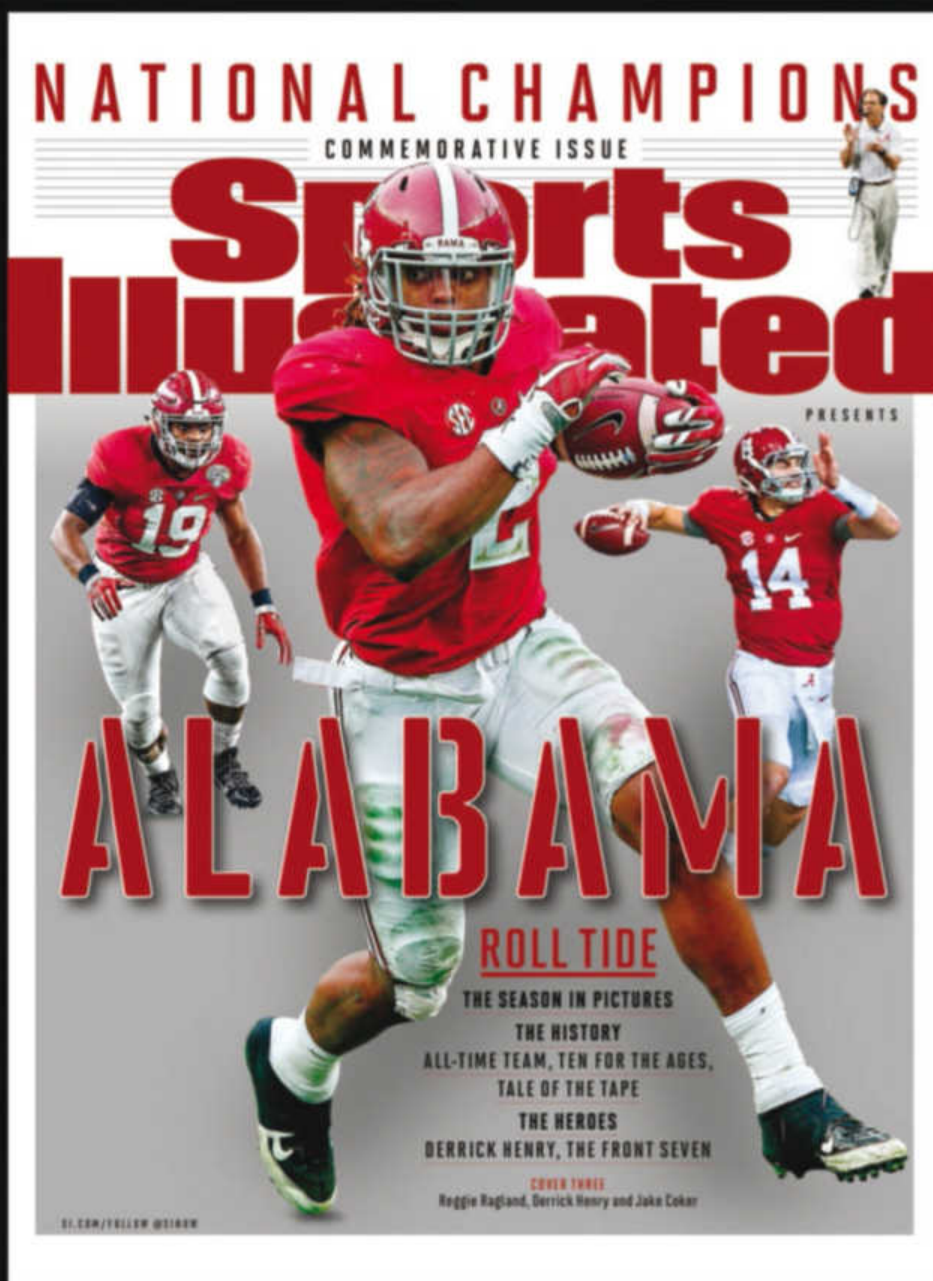
Porzingis is still adjusting to his length, while padding his frame with high-calorie breakfasts. He gestures as he speaks, and when he does, he knocks his phone off an armrest and onto the floor. He worries he cracked his screen. You imagine the damage he will wreak when he gains full control over his limbs.

After the Knicks beat the Heat, Stoudemire dresses in the home locker room, no TV cameras around. In 2011 he lived in a Meatpacking District apartment, complete with a billiards room, recording studio and replica barber shop. He ate herb-crusted chicken and challah bread, prepared by his kosher chef, and he soaked up views of the Empire State Building. This was back when Madison Square Garden was serenading him with MVP chants, Kanye West was flanking him after games and Walt Frazier was calling him a rock star.

Stoudemire, now 33, mentions that he has sold the apartment. "Everything in New York changes like the weather," he says. "As long as this kid understands there will be good days and bad days, good years and bad years, he'll be fine. Because he's not like the guys who came over here and didn't pan out.

"This time it's going to work." □

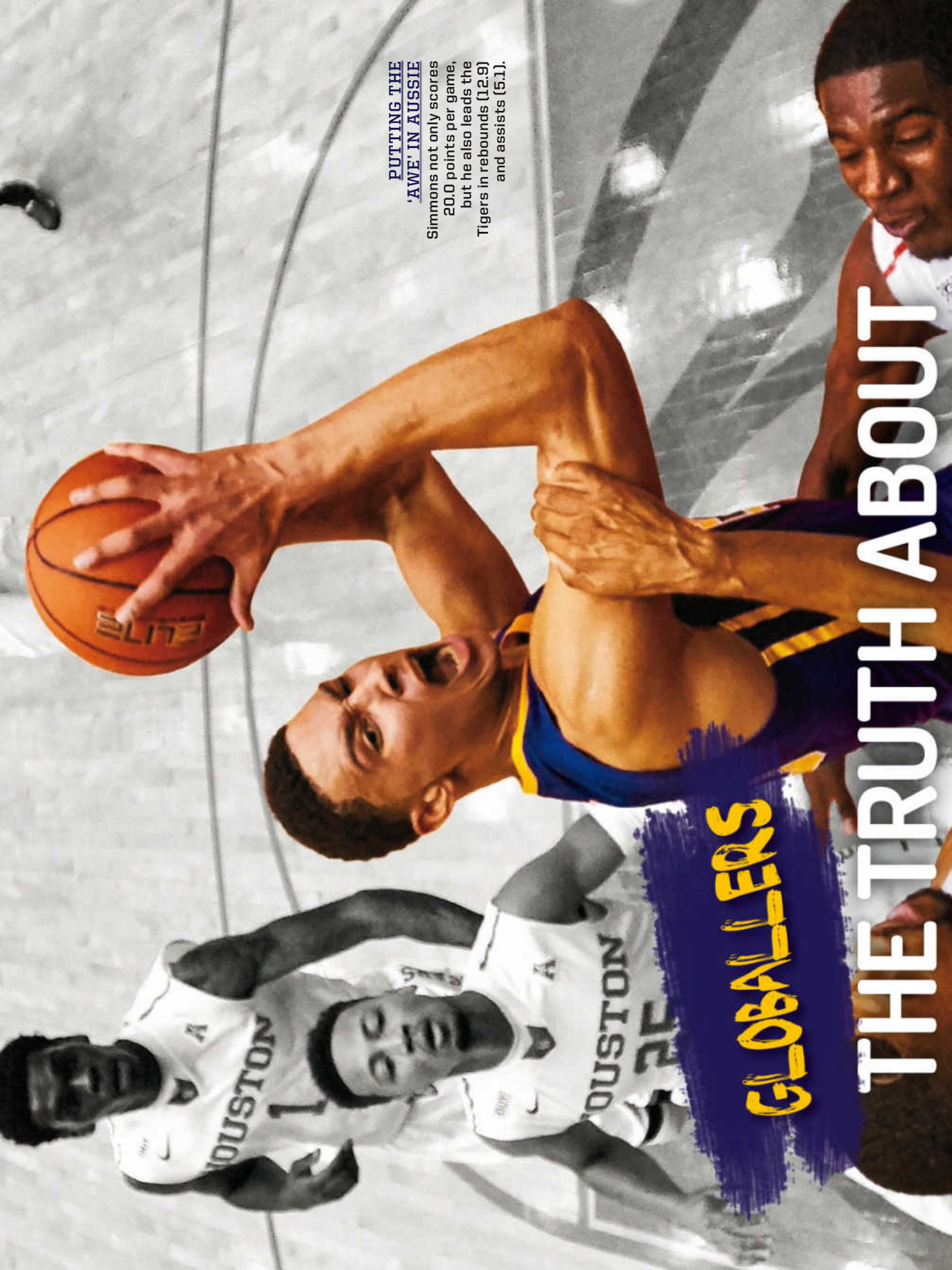
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PUTTING THE
'AWE' IN AUSSIE

Simmons not only scores
20.0 points per game,
but he also leads the
Tigers in rebounds (12.9)
and assists (5.1).

GLOBAL LERS

THE TRUTH ABOUT



BEN SIMMONS

WITH A UNIQUE
GAME DEVELOPED ON
TWO CONTINENTS,
THE LSU FRESHMAN
SENSATION IS HARD
TO DEFINE BUT EASY
TO APPRECIATE

BY LUKE WINN

Photographs by
Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated

“GETTING THE REBOUND AND GOING, THAT’S THE MOST FLUID PART OF MY GAME.”

THE FEW inarguable facts about Ben Simmons are that he was born in Melbourne, Australia, 19 years and six months ago; he is a 6' 10" freshman at Louisiana State who averages 20.0 points, 12.9 rebounds and 5.1 assists per game; and he is the player most likely to be picked No. 1 in the 2016 NBA Draft. After that, Simmons becomes more difficult to define. Is he a point-forward, a point-center, a giant floor general—or positionless? Is he lefthanded or (given all those righty finishes) ambidextrous? Should he be a primary ballhandler, to capitalize on his court vision and passing skills, or should he play in the paint, to exploit his advantage in athleticism over opposing big men? Is his game more Aussie-influenced or American-influenced, considering that he developed it in both countries and has one parent of each nationality? Can he responsibly be called the second coming of Magic or of King James? And can he be called the best player in the college game when his team is only 11–6?

It's easier, at this stage, to define Ben Simmons by what he is not.

I. Ben Simmons is not always playing the position he wants to at LSU, but he's O.K. with that.

On Dec. 21, Simmons arrives at LSU's practice facility during a heavy rainstorm wearing a sleeveless shirt with BASKETBALL IS MY GIRLFRIEND printed on the front, and he sits down in a room off the lobby to watch film on a laptop. A reporter has prepared an edit of all Simmons's possessions and assists in his first 10 games as a Tiger, and their variety is remarkable. At this point last season the two freshmen in the running for the No. 1 pick, Duke's Jahlil Okafor and Kentucky's Karl-Anthony Towns, both 6' 11", operated almost exclusively out of the post. The Tigers have been, according to coach Johnny Jones, “trying to exhaust every option” for using Simmons, and here in the video he leads the break as a ballhandler, plays point in the halfcourt and

sets up as a power forward on the elbow, as a post-up center on the blocks and as a pick-and-pop guy on the wing.

Of all the situations in these clips, Simmons is asked, which feels most natural to him?

“Transition, for sure,” he says. “Getting the rebound and going, that’s probably the most fluid part of my game.”

That’s when he feels free to . . .

. . . “just experiment and be creative,” he says.

If there were no restrictions, would he want to be a point guard all the time? “Definitely,” he replies. “I feel more comfortable running the point, because I know I can lead a team and take control of games.”

Simmons leads all major-conference players in rebounding, and he has a clear incentive to do so: Grabbing a defensive board enables him to play point guard. Otherwise he fills that role only at select times, mostly late in

games. The reason he doesn't ask Jones if he can play point 100% of the time is that the Tigers have a floor general, 6' 6" junior Tim Quarterman, who is good at his job. “You’ve got to think of other guys and what they would do,” Simmons says. “Tim’s really good at setting up the team and running it, so you couldn’t just have him standing on the three-point line. That wouldn’t work.”

II. Ben Simmons is not being honest with defenses.

If Simmons has a signature trait, it's that “he can almost will the defense to do things they don't even realize they're doing,” says his father, former college and pro player Dave Simmons. Look, for example, at the film clip of Ben's first college assist, against McNeese State on Nov. 13. He's in the middle lane of a three-on-two fast break, with the ball near half-court. LSU freshman guard Brandon Sampson is running ahead



GRAB BAG

From an early age, the 6' 10" Simmons honed his ability to shoot and pass with his left hand—and snatch boards with both.



of the play, in the right lane; Quarterman is running behind, on the far left. Simmons begins dribbling at a slight diagonal to the right. “They’re going to shift that way,” he says of the defenders, and they do, the deeper one moving toward Sampson, the other engaging Simmons. He holds them with his eyes for a beat—“If they’re looking at me, they’re not paying attention to anyone else,” he says—before throwing a righthanded around-the-back pass to Quarterman for a layup.

“That,” says Simmons, who prefers to dribble lefty and saw Quarterman only out of the corner of his eye, “came off nicely.”

Next on the edit comes a series of what are essentially ambush passes: Simmons, handling the ball on the perimeter, either tries to “act relaxed, like I’m not going to [drive] yet,” he says, or creates a distraction by gesturing for teammates to realign and then whips a pass to a three-point shooter who

has momentarily been left open. On one play, at Houston on Dec. 13, Simmons dribbles on the left wing so casually that the defender on senior guard Keith Hornsby (LSU’s catch-and-shoot option in the left corner) comes out of his stance, takes a step toward the center of the floor, looks at Simmons . . . and gets ambushed. “When he’s upright and facing me, and Keith’s below his vision, that shot is wide open,” Simmons says as he watches himself fire a pass so crisp to Hornsby’s shooting pocket that Hornsby will describe it as “almost a little distracting”—even though he made the three.

Is there someone else you’ve seen do this? Simmons is asked.

“LeBron does that a lot,” he says.

III. Ben Simmons is not LeBron.

But Simmons is a star of the first generation of players who grew up as LeBron fans—and his allegiance to LeBron transcends teams, from the Cavs to the Heat and back. That makes his older sister and confidante, Olivia, roll her eyes. “I would always get really mad at Ben,” says Olivia, a former forward at Arizona State. “I’d ask, ‘Who’s your team?’ and he’d be like, ‘I don’t have a team: I’m a LeBron fan.’ That’s not the way it works.”

It has worked so well for Ben that he’s now perhaps the only college-basketball-playing LeBron fan who also *texts* with LeBron, having developed enough of a relationship with him at sneaker camps for Simmons to consider the four-time MVP a “big brother.” Simmons is also the only player of his generation who could have watched the 2008 documentary about LeBron’s high school days, *More Than a Game*, and had the nondelusional thought, *I could take that a step further.*

A crew from Maggievision, the company that produces the ESPYs and did the 30 for 30 film *Of Miracles and Men*, has been following Simmons since his senior year at Montverde (Fla.) Academy in 2014. The project was Ben and his sisters’ brainchild. His older sister Emily Bush, who is married to NFL free-agent running back Michael Bush and works for James’s marketing firm, LRMR, contacted the producers and made sure the project wouldn’t run afoul of the NCAA. (Neither Ben nor any member of his family is involved in the business end of the film.) LSU has given the crew access during this season. “Once this is done,” Simmons says, “I’ll be the first one to have a documentary that shows you high school, college and then the draft, so you’ve seen everything that goes on leading up to the NBA.”

While he is not LeBron, Simmons’s version of life

HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH LEBRON IS SO SACRED, HE WON'T SHARE DETAILS WITH HIS FAMILY.

at 19 still involves cameras following him around. And the hardest thing for him was not finding filmmakers interested in the project but rather convincing his parents that it was a good idea.

IV. Ben Simmons is not an off-the-rack sneakers guy.

Dave and Julie Simmons's house in Baton Rouge is a one-story Acadian, part brick, part white siding, with a close-cropped green lawn. The couple have been renting it since late October to be near LSU's Pete Maravich Center. Simmons's mother, Julie, is a retired executive assistant; Dave still works for Impact Basketball, an Australian company that arranges camps and U.S. tours. They put up a tree in their living room, but on Dec. 20, there were no presents under it for Ben. "He'll maybe get a card, if he's lucky," Julie said laughing.

Julie is no Grinch. It's just that the family had to draw a line after allowing Ben, who would not be caught dead playing in LSU's team-issued Nikes, to spend "an exorbitant amount of money on custom shoes," according to Emily. Ben's nine pairs of LeBron XIIIs, seven of them custom-designed on Nike.com, cost more than \$2,000. Over his first 12 games at LSU he took the court in nine different styles. He has since given away a white pair he blamed for a loss (at Charleston on Nov. 30). The purple-with-white-bottoms pair he wore while scoring 43 points against North Florida on Dec. 2 is one of his favorites.

Simmons was O.K. with not receiving presents for Christmas. He says he didn't even ask for any.

"There's nothing I really want," he says. "The NBA is what I want. Unless someone can give me the NBA now, then. . . ."

So he'd have preferred to go to the NBA right away, rather than wait a year?

"I think I could've done it," he says. "Yup."

V. Ben Simmons is not long for amateurism.

Junior walk-on guard Henry Shortess is, true to his name, the shortest Tiger, at 5' 9". It has taken him three seasons to amass eight points, two assists and one rebound—numbers that Simmons often eclipses in the first half of a game. But Shortess, a business-management major who is on track to graduate in three years and aspires to work in an NBA front office, is fluent in hoops economics. After seeing the beginning of the Simmons Phenomenon during LSU's exhibition tour of Australia last summer—sold-out arenas in Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle, where crowds roared whenever Simmons touched the ball and fans waited at LSU's

hotels late into the night in hopes of getting an autograph, a photo or merely a glimpse of the future No. 1 pick—Shortess understands his teammate's long-term value.

"That's Australia, and Ben could eventually get to that level in the United States, so he's probably a very profitable brand," Shortess says. "Next year the salary cap in the NBA is going to explode, and then add endorsements [and] shoe deals, and a Nike, Adidas or Under Armour would want [Ben] as a face. I think he's that type of player and person."

Simmons, to his credit, never talks about this stuff among his teammates. But if Shortess ever needs reminding that a celebrity is in his midst, he need not go too far. Every time he drops by his family's home in Baton Rouge, his 12-year-old brother, Eli, brings up his unfulfilled birthday-present request: a signed pair of Simmons's shoes.

VI. Ben Simmons is not the owner of a large, deadly reptile. (Yet.)

When Ben was 13, he told his mother, "If I ever make a lot of money in the NBA, I'm going to have this massive tank, and it's going to have an alligator in it." In the meantime he's making do with economy pets. One of his roommates, Hornsby, provided a helpful chronology of Ben Simmons, College Freshman Pet Owner.

"The first thing he got," Hornsby says, "was the lizards"—three bearded dragons, sort of like tiny gators, in a terrarium. Simmons named the largest one Mutombo (after Dikembe) and the middle one



13

Double doubles for Simmons in 17 games, fifth most in Division I.

105

Free throws made this season, tied for 14th in the country. Simmons has attempted 142, which ranks 10th.

\$2,000

Amount Simmons spent on nine pairs of Nikes, including seven custom-designed LeBron XIIIs.





Zeus. The baby one was, tragically, eaten by the other lizards.

Hornsby continues, “Then came the snakes”—two corn snakes. One of them was given away; the other, Hornsby says, “disappeared.” That was followed by a less-than-24-hour adventure in owning a shelter dog, which another student fortunately adopted. “The dog was a bad idea,” says Hornsby. “The rats, another bad idea.” The two rodents, purchased mostly to freak out roommate Darcy Malone, a junior center, have since been given to other owners. “And then the fish,” Hornsby adds. Most of those—including a Tiger Oscar and a tiny lobster—are still in the apartment tank, and the three roommates sometimes pull up chairs and engage in extended fish-observation sessions.

Simmons also bought a tabby kitten and named it Tiger, but it was a present for Olivia when she and their parents moved to Baton Rouge. Because her old cat, Tom,

who passed away in Australia, was so beloved, Olivia’s analysis of the mischievous kitten is akin to a scout’s expecting Simmons to be fully mature as a freshman: “He’s just not measuring up to my expectations,” Olivia says.

VII. Ben Simmons is not one to keep a large circle.

His texting relationship with LeBron is so sacred that he won’t share any details with his family, save for revealing a key piece of advice the superstar gave him: Keep your family close. Which is why Ben did not simply tolerate but welcomed his relatives’ relocation from Australia, first to be with him for his senior year at Montverde and now to be near LSU. It is also one reason why Ben committed to LSU so early in the recruiting process, on Oct. 14, 2013. The final assistant coach that Jones hired, after taking the job in 2012, was Simmons’s godfather, David Patrick.

Patrick moved from Bermuda to Melbourne with his Sri Lanka-born mother, Victoreen, when he was 10. As a young teen, David was in the Melbourne Tigers’ junior program while Dave Simmons and fellow import Lanard Copeland, a former Georgia State star, played for the senior club. “I didn’t have a father figure, and there weren’t many people of color in Melbourne then to relate to,” Patrick says. “Those two guys took me under their wing.”

In the young Patrick, Dave Simmons saw a “trustworthy kid whose mother cared about education” and encouraged him to further his schooling in the

U.S. A 1994 junior-team tour took David through Baton Rouge, where Chapel Trafton took him in as a senior-year exchange student. He later played college ball at Syracuse and Louisiana-Lafayette.

As a rookie with Australia’s Canberra Cannons in 1999–2000, Patrick not only played alongside his mentor, the then 36-year-old Dave Simmons, but also lived in Dave and Julie’s house with the young Ben and Olivia. Two years later, in a Catholic ceremony in Newcastle, Patrick became Ben’s godfather. And in 2014, when Patrick’s mother was in the final, fatal months of her battle with breast cancer, she moved into the Simmons’ Melbourne home to be cared for by Julie.

The bond continues in Baton Rouge. On the Sunday before Christmas 2015, while Patrick was off recruiting in Florida, the Simmons’ babysat his young daughters, Bailee and Madison. As David and Julie sat together on a living-room couch, the Patrick girls were with Emily in the kitchen, making a brunch of chocolate-chip pancakes and quiche. “When people say we’re close,” Patrick says of the families, “they usually don’t know how close.”

VIII. Ben Simmons is not an import.

His takeover of the U.S. college game is more like the closing of a loop. The Simmons family basketball story begins at South Bronx (N.Y.) High in 1980, the dawn of the hip-hop era. Adrian Harris, aka Easy A.D. of the Cold Crush Brothers, one of the hip-hop scene’s foundational groups, was South Bronx’s point guard. The team had a DJ, nicknamed the Tape Master, playing breakbeats—among them a sped-up version of Cerrone’s “Rocket in the Pocket”—from a table near the gym’s main doors to keep the crowd hyped. South Bronx’s muscle, its designated dunker

HE'S A HYBRID OF GUARD AND FORWARD, FUNDAMENTALS AND FLASH.

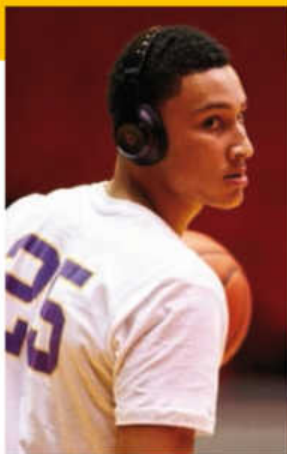
BEN
SIMMONS

and rebounder, was a shy 6' 8" kid named Dave Simmons. "Dave didn't have a negative vibration in his body," Easy A.D. told SI in a recent phone interview, "but on the court, he was the toughest."

Easy A.D.'s Cold Crush Brothers went on to become hip-hop pioneers; Dave went to junior college in Oklahoma and then moved on to star for Oklahoma City University, an NAIA school, as a sixth-year senior in 1986–87, when the Chiefs went 34–1. Before Dave and other seniors were introduced at a postseason Rotary Club awards luncheon, OCU's coach, Abe Lemons, delivered a punch line containing too much cruel truth: "This will be the last time anybody ever knows who you are."

Things were looking that way after Dave's anonymous stints in pro ball in Venezuela, Colombia and Costa Rica. But his life changed on Nov. 14, 1988, when a barnstorming foreign pro team visited for an exhibition at the University of Oklahoma. Dave's agent told him they were Austrians and were interested in trying him out; it was only when he met the coach, Lindsay Gaze, in the lobby of the team's hotel that Dave discovered they were Australians. He suited up that evening for a team billed as the Victoria All-Stars, which committed 45 turnovers and lost to the Sooners by 55 points. Victoria's lone bright spot was Dave, who scored 20 points; afterward Gaze told the *The Oklahoman*, "We'll be having a talk [with Simmons] to find out what his ambitions are regarding the prospects of playing in Australia."

Dave soon signed a one-year deal to play for Gaze's team, the Tigers, in Melbourne, the major city farthest on the entire planet from New York. Simmons's intention was the same as at his South American stops: "Stay a year," he says, "and get out" to a better deal. But the money was good; he and another import, former Dayton star Dave Colbert, became fan favorites nicknamed the Double Ds, and another thing happened: "Simmo fell in love, which I think may have helped the cause of keeping him in our program," says his former teammate Andrew Gaze, the coach's son and the



lone Australian-born player in the FIBA Hall of Fame. Dave Simmons began dating Julie Blake, one of the Lady Tigers dancers and an aerobics instructor. He was unfazed by the fact that she already had four children. "I don't know what you were thinking," Julie says to him now, smiling. "You must not have been on your A game."

They eventually got married. Meanwhile Dave kept signing new contracts and developed a brand in the Aussie pro league. "He became a Charles Oakley-type enforcer," says Copeland. "If you came into the paint, Dave would put you on your butt." A T-shirt was sold in Melbourne in the early 1990s with DAVID SIMMONS SAYS NO printed on the front, and his stepchildren used it as a punch line. Dave was so overprotective that they would ask, Can we go out tonight? and then refer to the shirt and proclaim, *David Simmons says . . . nooooo.*

Dave and Julie had two kids of their own, Olivia and Ben, and they were given immense freedom—at

least to develop all-around basketball skills rather than rely on their height. "Kids need to be allowed to experiment and be creative," Dave says. When she was 11, Olivia (who would grow to six feet) countered a coach who wanted her in the post by telling him, "My dad says I can dribble the ball, and I'm going to dribble the ball."

Ben was encouraged to dribble lefty and righty and to finish with both hands. His mind was expanded by the (purists, hold your groans) And1 Mixtape Tour's stop in Sydney when he was seven. That was when he says the concept of "creating moves" dawned on him. Ben now sets up passes or finishes drives with moves that Dave believes are not emulation but rather "stuff that only Ben has inside his head." The American stage of his development—spending his final 2½ years of high school at Montverde and playing this season at LSU—has been about complementing his instincts with the physicality, speed and swagger of the U.S. game. Now he is a rare hybrid, mixing elements of guard and forward, fundamentals and flash, Down Under and Stateside.

Easy A.D. has gotten glimpses of the son of his South Bronx teammate this season, including when LSU played two games at Brooklyn's Barclays Center. It was no surprise that an M.C. had little trouble epigrammatically defining what Ben Simmons is. Easy A.D. did not, like a certain sportswriter, have to resort to negation.

"I saw Ben play, and I'm like, where did he get those skills?" Easy A.D. said. "They're incredible! He's very polished. His dad obviously helped him—Ben can dunk and own the boards—but he can also dribble, he can pass, he can shoot. He is, as we would say in the hip-hop world, the *truth*." □



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Moving Violations

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

WHEN YOU CONSIDER that Los Angeles stole the Rams from St. Louis, which had previously stolen them from Los Angeles, which had long before stolen them from Cleveland, whose NHL Barons had been the California Golden Seals before Cleveland stole them from Oakland, whose Raiders were stolen by—and then stolen back from—Los Angeles, which is the city that stole the Dodgers from Brooklyn, then you can hardly blame Brooklyn for swiping. . . .

The Nets, which the borough stole from New Jersey, which had stolen them from Long Island, which had stolen them previously from their original home in New Jersey, a state that would steal the Jets and the Giants away from New York while also stealing the hockey Devils from . . .

Denver, whose NHL Colorado Rockies were called the Scouts before Denver stole them from Kansas City, which had already stolen the Athletics from Philadelphia before those A's were stolen again, this time by Oakland, which also stole the Warriors from San Francisco, the city that previously stole them from Philadelphia and also stole the baseball Giants from Manhattan, which the Dutch stole from the Lenape Indians, original residents of New York, which also stole . . .

The Yankees (né Highlanders) from Baltimore, which stole the Cleveland Browns (rebranded the Ravens) after Indianapolis had stolen their Colts, a team that itself had risen from the still-warm corpse of the Texans of Dallas, a city that paid it forward by stealing hockey's North Stars from Minnesota, a state that had already stolen the Twins from Washington (where they were the Senators), a city that in turn stole basketball's Bullets (now Wizards) from Baltimore, which had previously stolen them from Chicago (where they were called the Zephyrs), the same Chicago that saw its football Cardinals stolen by St. Louis, which would in turn see them stolen by Arizona, necessitating the theft by St. Louis of the Rams from Los Angeles, which is no City of Angels because . . .

Los Angeles also stole the Clippers from San Diego, which had stolen them from Buffalo, where they were known as the Braves, just like the baseball team in Boston that now plays in Atlanta, which stole them from Milwaukee, the same Milwaukee that—after robbing Boston of the Braves and being robbed of them by Atlanta—had the good sense to steal the Pilots (rebranded the

Brewers) from Seattle, whose basketball Sonics were later stolen by Oklahoma City and renamed the Thunder, which is why Seattle has tried and failed to steal the Kings from Sacramento, even though . . .

Sacramento had already stolen that team fair-and-square from Kansas City, which had renamed them the Kings after stealing them from Cincinnati, where they were the Royals, a team Cincinnati had stolen from Rochester, whose NBA-loving citizens could still drive a modest distance to watch the rival Syracuse Nationals—or might have been able to if the Nats hadn't been stolen away and turned into the 76ers by . . .

Philadelphia, whose professional lacrosse team, the Wings, now ply their trade as the New England Black Wolves of Connecticut, a tiny state whose Hartford Whalers were stolen by Raleigh and became the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes, whose home state in turn had its NBA Hornets stolen by New Orleans, whose Jazz had been stolen by Utah, whose WNBA Starzz were stolen by San Antonio, which has been trying for years to steal the Raiders from our old friends in Oakland, who may yet see their Raiders stolen instead by . . .

Los Angeles, which also stole the Lakers from Minneapolis and still might steal the Chargers from San Diego to complement the Rams, newly stolen from St. Louis, whose baseball Browns had been stolen by Baltimore (they're now the Orioles) but whose St. Louis football Cardinals had been stolen, you'll recall, from Chicago, an otherwise blameless city that only ever stole its current NFL team, the Bears, who were formerly the Staleys before being lifted from central Illinois, a state whose people never stole anything (if you don't count half their governors), which is why the city you should *really* feel sorry for in this whole NFL-to-L.A. debacle is . . .

Decatur, Illinois—"Pride of the Prairie," "Soybean Capital of the World," former home of the Decatur Staleys and the only American hamlet that can truly say, without fear of contradiction, *We was robbed.*

Chicago saw
its football
Cardinals
stolen by
St. Louis,
which in
turn had
them stolen
by Arizona,
necessitating
the theft by
St. Louis
of the
Rams
from L.A.,
which is no
City of Angels
because . . .


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franchise move
should be
undone?

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